



**Wilderness Advisory
Committee**

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Hon. Ian Hunter MLC
Minister for Sustainability, Environment and Conservation
GPO Box 1047
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Dear Minister

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Premier's reform agenda. The Wilderness Advisory Committee is of the view, given its clearly articulated functions, the need for these to be undertaken at arms length from government and its effectiveness, that our work and current structure should continue. The case for this is made below.

Overview of the Committee's work

Since the enactment of the *Wilderness Protection Act 1992*, the Wilderness Advisory Committee has fulfilled its primary role of advising on the identification and management of areas with wilderness values in this State. The Committee has undertaken systematic land assessments and facilitated consultation processes that have led to the protection of some of the State's 'best' remote and natural lands.

The Wilderness Protection Act is unique in Australia because it was crafted to provide a framework to manage land for its remote and natural values, rather than restrictive notion of wilderness preservation followed elsewhere. This approach recognizes that there are lands in South Australia that have remote and natural characteristics but may be subject to some other land use. The Wilderness Advisory Committee sees that there are opportunities to extend the wilderness management frameworks over some land in the arid and semi-arid regions of the State, in collaboration with pastoral lessees. This proposal is outlined below.

Functions of the Wilderness Advisory Committee

The functions of the Committee, defined in *Wilderness Protection Act 1992*, are clear -

- (a) assess all land in the State to identify those parts of the State that meet the *Act's wilderness criteria* to a sufficient extent to justify protection under the *Act* or that warrant restoration to a condition that justifies such protection; and
- (b) at the request of a member of the public to assess the extent to which land specified in the request meets the wilderness criteria; and
- (c) report to the Minister on results of its assessment under paragraphs (a) and (b) and to make recommendations to the Minister as to what land in the State should be constituted as

- wilderness protection areas or wilderness protection zones; and
- (d) make recommendations to the Minister in relation to the management of wilderness protection areas and zones generally or in relation to a particular wilderness protection area or zone; and
 - (e) commission research into the effect of mining, grazing and other forms of primary production and tourism on wilderness and wildlife and to advise the Minister of the findings of the research; and
 - (f) increase understanding in the community of the significance of wilderness; and
 - (g) assist the Minister in relation to the preparation of the annual report under Division 1; and
 - (h) functions assigned to the Committee by other provisions of the Act.

Background

Effectiveness

The current extent of the statewide wilderness assessment is shown on the attached maps.

To date, the Committee has undertaken 19 assessments of wilderness quality and recommended protection in each. Of the 19 recommendations 13 have been acted on and approximately 1.8 million hectares of Wilderness Protection Area constituted. It is probable that the Committee's assessment of the Mawson Plateau contributed to its protection under the *Arkaroola Protection Act 2012*. The statewide assessment process is not complete, with approximately 30 areas of high quality wilderness awaiting examination.

Advice provided to the Minister also includes comments on submissions from stakeholders in relation to 10 management plans for Wilderness Protection Areas and advice on matters ranging from fire management to amendments to the Wilderness Code of Management.

Public engagement in decision making

The Act enables members of the public to nominate areas for a wilderness assessment by the Committee. Public nomination has resulted in protection in a number of cases. Before a wilderness protection area or zone can be constituted, the Committee's report and recommendations are circulated for public comment for three months. These submissions (except submissions made in confidence) are available for public inspection, as are the Committee's comments on the submissions. The development of management plans has two rounds of public consultation, the first on issues to be addressed in the plan and the second on the draft plan itself. An additional, but as yet unused, safeguard of public engagement lies in the civil enforcement provisions of the Act which provide for third party standing.

Robustness of public engagement process is demonstrated by the Minister's decision to decline wilderness protection proposals for Manungari Conservation Park, Innamincka Regional Reserve, Coongie Lakes National Park, Bascombe Well Conservation Park, Coffin Bay National Park and Ngarkat Conservation Park.

The Committee had productive face to face meetings with the Kangaroo Island and Eyre Peninsula communities and the lessees of Arkaroola as part of the consultation process. However we acknowledge that more needs to be done in relation to public engagement, including better

communication with local communities through the NRM framework, better sharing of wilderness data with stakeholders and the better use of new technology to reduce problems associated with remoteness of the communities involved. Currently the Committee is working on a project to increase public understanding of the significance of wilderness using a smart phone app and a request for preliminary design work is with the Department. We are also working on the second draft of a document sharing wilderness data with NRM Boards.

Independence of the Committee

The Committee consists of the Director of National Parks and Wildlife and four other members -

- (a) one of whom has qualifications or experience in a field of science that is relevant to the conservation of ecosystems and the relationship of wildlife with the environment;
- (b) one of whom has been nominated by the Minister from a panel of three persons selected by the Wilderness Society SA Branch Incorporated;
- (c) two of whom have wide experience in the management or recreational use of wilderness.

The separation of the Committee from government has enabled the statewide assessment of wilderness values to proceed at arms length from Governments of the day. It has also given the Committee freedom to innovate. For example in the Committee's Yellabinna and Nullarbor assessments Departmental negotiations on potential boundaries took place with the primary stakeholder prior to whole of community consultation, with outstanding results. In the Committee's recent report *Measures for Improving Wilderness Protection in South Australia's Arid Lands* innovative pathways for obtaining high quality conservation at a regional scale were explored.

Efficiency

Our advice has been cost effective. The Committee of five, meets four times a year and the current member's sitting fee is \$ 103.00 per four hour session. Additionally, members work with no remuneration on field assessments of three to eight days duration. The Committee also devotes substantial out of session time to report writing including *Measures for Improving Wilderness Protection in South Australia's Arid Lands* in which Departmental inputs were largely limited to the provision of maps, text on pages 29 and 30, editing and document production.

The Committee undertakes its functions with no staff or specific budget of its own.

Alternative forms of delivery of the Committee's functions

In response to the Premier's reform of committees, three possibilities were considered by members :-

- 1) Amalgamation with another Committee- if this was the National Parks and Wildlife Council, the current efficiencies of the Wilderness Advisory Committee, which are linked to small size and specialized role, would be lost as the Council has twice the membership and a set of functions based on other legislation. It would also increase the expense of field trips.
- 2) Transfer of functions of the Committee to the Department – this appears to be contrary to the Government's wish for greater public engagement. Employing departmental staff with the necessary expertise may not be as cost effective.
- 3) Setting up task forces on an as needs basis- this appears to be at odds with the requirements of a consistent statewide wilderness assessment and with long term management planning.

Committee's future work

In the report, *Measures for Improving Wilderness Protection in South Australia's Arid Lands*, the Committee recommended the development of a pathway to provide a layer of protection for wilderness values over parts of a pastoral lease without the need for resumption or boundary changes. This proposition may be attractive both to pastoralists with a particular interest in conservation and those wishing to diversify their operations to include low impact 'high end' tourism providing a genuine Outback experience.

Wilderness is gaining an important economic dimension. Tourism Research Australia market surveys show that nature-based tourism is the primary travel motivator across all of Australia's traditional inbound markets. Research also shows that 'nature' is key motivator for the rapidly expanding Chinese market.


Relatively undisturbed natural landscapes are increasingly rare at a global scale and regions that have tracts of land with these characteristics have a competitive advantage in a burgeoning international tourism market. The target market in this context is the "experience seeker" which is characterised by high dollar/low impact. South Australia's wilderness system, particularly in arid and semi-arid zones, is potentially a major drawcard for this market and a significant contributor to state and regional economies.

Tourism and its support services provide economic development opportunities to regional areas that traditionally have relied on agriculture and pastoralism. There are already some examples of pastoral lessees in the Flinders Ranges who are successfully managing their properties for nature-based tourism instead of pastoralism. These enterprises have given longer term viability to the lessees and provided employment to others in the area, notably indigenous communities.

Protection and management of wilderness values is thus an important economic issue for South Australia. The Wilderness Advisory Committee is best placed to identify areas in the arid and semi-arid regions of the State that meet the wilderness criteria under the Act, and to facilitate the consultation processes with the relevant pastoral lessees. The objective of consultation would be to reach agreement on management arrangements that would maintain wilderness values and provide lessees with business opportunities in wilderness tourism

The Wilderness Advisory Committee strongly believes its past achievements and proposed future directions place it in a unique position in relation to the ongoing management of significant areas of South Australia. We look forward to continuing this work.

Yours Sincerely



Eric Bills
PRESIDING MEMBER
WILDERNESS ADVISORY COMMITTEE