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Certification

← *Many of Australia's beautiful and diverse flora are growing in the Australian National Botanic Gardens.*

Photo: David Woltschenko

The year in review

Our work took a major new focus this year, with the declaration of 40 new Commonwealth marine reserves in November 2012 creating the world's most comprehensive, representative and largest marine reserves network. With the preparation, approval and tabling in Parliament in early 2013 of six management plans covering the network, the responsibility for implementing new management arrangements commenced with the South-east Commonwealth Marine Reserves Network management plan coming into effect on 1 July 2013. The remaining management plans are scheduled to commence on 1 July 2014.

Of huge cultural significance was the passage of legislation through Parliament that incorporated the Koongarra area into Kakadu National Park. This marked the end of a very long campaign led by Djok traditional owner Jeffrey Lee to bring his country into the park and protect it forever from uranium mining.

A period of organisational change

The 2012–13 financial year has been a period of significant structural change for Parks Australia. The marine reserves management team joined us in early 2013 and two protected area teams departed when responsibility for administering the National Reserve System and Indigenous Protected Area programs transferred to the department.

Taken together, these two highly successful programs have resulted in a doubling of Australia's terrestrial protected area estate since their inception.

The commitment to establish a national reserve system was made in the early 1990s with the groundwork laid with the creation of two major national datasets—the national biogeographic regionalisation or IBRA, and the national database of protected areas or CAPAD. From these beginnings, innovative thinkers committed to working with Indigenous land owners on conservation and looking after culture and country, pioneered the concept of Indigenous Protected Areas.

The formal establishment and inclusion of the National Reserve System program, initially through the Natural Heritage Trust and subsequently through the Caring for our Country Program, provided a major investment that supported the purchase or expansion of over 300 national parks and reserves across the country. By 30 June 2013 there were also 59 Indigenous Protected Areas declared, comprising more than a third of the National Reserve System.

We're proud of the role we have played over the past two decades developing and administering these programs, and of the significant contribution they have made to protecting Australia's biodiversity and landscapes.

Conserving biodiversity

Comments from prominent environmentalists on the ongoing decline of native mammal populations across northern Australia led to a lively and timely debate on the role and effectiveness of reserves in protecting species from extinction. In common with all reserve managers, our park managers are only too well aware of the intensifying pressures on native species—from climate change, weeds and feral animals just to name a few—and we manage our parks to maintain functional ecosystems and support resilience against threatening processes.

We continue to look for new ways to tackle biodiversity challenges. This year Kakadu National Park hosted leading scientists, researchers, traditional owners and on-ground conservation staff at a workshop designed to update the park's threatened species strategy with the latest scientific thinking. On Christmas Island, a further successful aerial baiting program provided relief from the impacts of invasive crazy ants, while a promising long-term control solution is getting closer to on-ground testing. Recently completed research indicates that biological control is feasible and we are about to embark on a trial control program in partnership with La Trobe University.

The pressures on our biodiversity in the wild mean that rescue and insurance operations are sometimes required, such as the collection and storage of seed from endangered plants by the Australian National Botanic Gardens and captive breeding or translocation of threatened animals.

Pulu Keeling National Park this year translocated Cocos buff-banded rails to a rat-free island to establish an insurance population for this species that for many years only survived in the park. Previous successful interventions include the captive-breeding of two of Christmas Island's drastically declining native reptiles and the re-introduction of the endangered and culturally important mala or rufous hare-wallaby to Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park. These successes and the investments that underpin them highlight an important issue. With finite resources, can we afford to save everything and, if we can't, what do we try to save and on what do we base those difficult decisions? This is clearly a controversial matter but one which we are increasingly being forced to face—this debate will undoubtedly continue for some time yet.

While we have many challenges with declining biodiversity there are also successes. Our ongoing fox control effort at Booderee National Park has been rewarded with healthy populations of birds and mammals subject elsewhere to fox predation, including stable numbers of the endangered eastern bristlebird. Research undertaken at Kakadu through the Australian Government's National Environmental Research Program has doubled the number of records of the spartooth shark and highlighted the importance of the park's tidal rivers and estuaries for this critically endangered species. At Uluru–Kata Tjuta, control efforts in biodiversity-rich areas of the park have led to a reduction in the number of feral animals recorded.

Supporting tourism

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A key continuing challenge for both our parks and our tourism partners is how to best to arrest the decline in domestic and international visitors, and the resultant revenue impacts on park budgets. While this decline is generally held to be a flow-on effect of the global financial crisis and the high value of the Australian dollar, changing patterns of leisure travel have resulted in shorter trips, and lower visitation to regional and remote areas. For the two parks in the Northern Territory where these issues are most pronounced, a high priority continues to be working closely with the tourism industry and tourism organisations to encourage and facilitate the development of new visitor experiences to attract, educate and immerse domestic and international tourists in the natural and cultural riches of these parks.

To help assess visitor needs and guide visitor management planning, we conducted visitor experience assessment workshops with our tourism stakeholders on Christmas Island and the Jim Jim/Twin Falls precinct of Kakadu. The workshops kick-started the production of visitor experience plans to enhance existing experiences and identify potential new ones. Collaborative work with traditional owners, local communities, the tourism industry, the Central Land Council, and Tourism NT continues at Uluru–Kata Tjuta to identify new visitor experiences and bring them to market.

This year our partnership with Tourism Australia continued to flourish with the launch of the Wet Tropics, Tasmania and Sydney Harbour as part of Australia's National Landscapes program, completing the suite of 16 National Landscapes. Eleven experience development strategies are finalised, with the remaining five underway. The strategies are a vital tool for the tourism industry in each Landscape to identify, encourage and guide the development of new experiences and conservation initiatives.

We were all very proud when Uluru–Kata Tjuta was recognised as Australia's best major tourist attraction in the 2012 Qantas Australian Tourism Awards. This is the first time a national park has won this award and confirms Uluru–Kata Tjuta as an outstanding hallmark attraction, providing international and domestic tourists with a world-class experience in one of Australia's most iconic World Heritage sites. The award also recognises the commitment by traditional owners and our staff to offer visitors the opportunity to engage with a complex story of culture and connection to country.

At Booderee, two tourism businesses run by traditional owners from the Wreck Bay Community continue to thrive and broaden their product offering. Improved website information, and refreshed brochures and signs resulted in the park's best ever camping revenue. In Kakadu, the Indigenous-owned Yellow Water Cruises continued its success, awarded Best Major Tour in the Qantas Australian Tourism Awards. At Uluru–Kata Tjuta over 300 new interpretive and information signs were installed, providing a greater insight into the park's natural and cultural values. This year's visitor surveys continued to record very high visitor satisfaction levels in our national parks.

Our staff at Kakadu have worked hard over the year to transition a range of tourism activities from permits to more flexible commercial activity licences. New licence arrangements are set to commence on 1 April 2014. The revised commercial arrangements pave the way for commercial operators and traditional owners to introduce new visitor experiences at Uluru–Kata Tjuta and Kakadu, particularly for tourism products that involve a degree of exclusivity.



We work hard to maximise opportunities to promote our parks across the media. This year we have reached many more potential visitors via our improved web and social media presence. Regular use of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and a Parks Australia blog is building interest in our parks. We have strategically arranged web content to better market our parks to an international audience—bringing foreign language visitor guides and other information to the home page of each of our parks is one example. We have also added new features such as a learning guide for Indigenous languages spoken at Uluru–Kata Tjuta, more educational materials for kids and schools, audio tours, and five birdwatching apps to educate and enhance the experience for visitors.

Improving infrastructure

Managing infrastructure effectively is another challenge for our reserves. During the year we began implementing our new strategic management asset framework which allows for asset planning and forecasting over a three to five year period. The framework links asset procurement and management with relevant risk, work, health and safety considerations. QR asset barcodes are attached to most assets allowing more efficient stocktake processes.

Work on the new Red Centre Garden at the Australian National Botanic Gardens is well underway. It will be a spectacular addition to our Gardens when opened later in 2013.

We have completed our planning and design for the replacement of Murray's Wharf at Booderee with construction scheduled for the second half of 2013.

We've upgraded the 'Pink House' research centre on Christmas Island to provide better facilities for researchers and expanded our dedicated housing for captive populations of the island's threatened native reptiles. Norfolk Island National Park completed a purpose-built 'Discovery Centre' which is set to be a drawcard for all visitors to the island, featuring hands-on displays about the park, its plants, animals and history.

International developments

IUCN, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, is the world's oldest and largest global environmental organisation and Australia is a significant contributor to its work. In September I was privileged to lead the Australian delegation to the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Korea where IUCN's priorities and work program are set for the next four years.

A key issue discussed in Korea was planning for the sixth World Parks Congress which Australia is hosting in Sydney in November 2014. Held at 10-year intervals since 1962, this major global forum is the world's largest and most influential gathering of parks and protected area experts. The Congress helps set a positive policy agenda for protected area management around the world, establishing the priorities and new commitments for protected areas over the coming decade. Some 3000 delegates from around 160 countries are expected to attend, many of whom will get to visit and experience our national parks. We're working closely with our co-hosts, IUCN and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, on planning for the Congress.

Australia is a signatory to the Nagoya Protocol, an international treaty which promotes ethical and sustainable use of genetic resources in a rapidly expanding multi-billion dollar industry. Under the framework of this treaty, Parks Australia manages Australia's globally recognised access and benefit-sharing system covering Commonwealth land and waters. In November we continued our capacity-building work in the Pacific Region by hosting the first ever Oceania Biodiscovery Forum. The forum provided an opportunity for researchers and policy officers from across the South Pacific to exchange ideas about the sustainable use of biodiversity and how best to implement this new international regime in the region.

As well as participating in key global forums, our parks hosted a number of international visitors this year. In October Uluru–Kata Tjuta hosted the German State Minister for Culture and Media, Bernd Neumann, who visited the park's cultural centre and met local Anangu artists. A high-level delegation from Papua New Guinea, headed by the Minister for Environment and Conservation, the Hon John Pundari MP, visited the Australian National Botanic Gardens in November as part of consultations with government officials in Canberra. Following the World Indigenous Conference in May, Kakadu hosted a delegation from New Zealand led by distinguished Maori leaders Sir Tumu Te Heu heu, the eighth paramount chief of the Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Tā Mark Solomon, Kaiwhakahaere Chair, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, and Mr Kevin Prime. National delegates from Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Solomon Islands and other countries also visited Kakadu following the conference. In June we shared knowledge on management of national parks and protection of cultural sites with visiting officials from East Timor.

Business and financial management

The Minister for Finance and Deregulation approved an operating loss of \$9.80 million for the 2012–13 financial year, which had arisen primarily as a result of our asset revaluation in 2010–11. The actual operating loss for 2012–13 was \$9.69 million.

Our financial control framework remains sound and is well regarded by internal and external auditors, continuing our history of good financial performance. This year was the fifth consecutive year with no adverse audit findings. I would like to acknowledge the contribution from all of our staff involved in financial management and control for this excellent result.

Overall entry fee revenue was below budget projections, largely as a result of the continued decline of visitation at Uluru–Kata Tjuta. We are actively working with Tourism Australia and Tourism NT to promote and increase visitation.

Revenue from Government (Grants from Portfolio Agency) was lower than the previous financial year primarily due to reduced ongoing new policy funding and the impact of the efficiency dividend.

I'm delighted we received a highly commended (small agency) in the Comcover Awards for Excellence Enterprise-wide category recognising our achievements in risk management. The award, and our continuing above average performance in risk management for Australian Government agencies, reflects how important this issue is and I thank all staff for their contribution to this great result.

Our people

Our capacity to meet our challenges and commitments each year directly relies on our skilled and dedicated staff. While we've had the benefit of a stable management structure for several years, the addition of a new branch led by Charlton Clark and dedicated to the management of Commonwealth marine reserves has strengthened our core capabilities, especially in areas of protected area management, operations and compliance and enforcement. However the transfer out from Parks Australia of staff responsible for the two protected area funding programs was keenly felt.

The Parks Australia Forum, where our senior managers meet to discuss doing our business better, was again held at the Australian National Botanic Gardens in August. The forum guides decision-making for the year and reinforces the relationships that make our organisation strong. The Parks Australia Science Forum and its associated network has been very successful in enhancing our use of science, especially in relation to biodiversity and natural resource management. The department's National Environmental Research Program is also providing invaluable scientific expertise, contributing to better diagnosis and treatment of the factors behind biodiversity decline at several of our national parks.

A key issue for us is employment of Indigenous people, particularly at the three jointly-managed national parks. This year we recorded a slight increase in the number of Indigenous staff. While this is pleasing, we clearly have much more to do, especially in capacity-building. In that regard, we were successful in gaining a \$92,000 investment from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to deliver an Indigenous leadership program in the West Arnhem Region in which Kakadu traditional owners will play a key role as mentors for participants. Kakadu's successful community ranger program, which provides a clear pathway to employment in the park, has secured funding for a further four years from the Australian Government's Working on Country Program.

The departmental Australia Day awards honour our highly skilled and professional staff. This year Murray Fagg was recognised for his outstanding and sustained commitment to the understanding and promotion of Australian flora and botanic gardens, and for innovation in public science and natural history communication through the visual and electronic media. Although recently retired, Murray continues to contribute to the work of the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

Bernie McLeod at Booderee National Park won the award for Outstanding Contribution to Educational Achievements by a Community Member in the Nanga Mai Awards which celebrate Indigenous excellence in public schools in New South Wales. Nanga Mai is an Eora word meaning 'to dream' and Bernie helps making dreams a reality for the park and the community—we are delighted to see him awarded for his work.

Hezekiel Jingoona, an ambassador of the Muṭitjulu Community Ranger Program at Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park, won the 2012 NAIDOC Senior Aboriginal Elder of the Year award for long-term commitment to keeping culture strong, teaching culture and language and working with park staff and his community. Hezekiel makes a contribution to the cultural education of park visitors, park staff and Anangu youth.

Uluru–Kata Tjuta staff and board members past and present were saddened by the passing of Kunmanara, a key senior Anangu elder in the fight for the handback of title to the park. Involved from the beginning of joint management, he used his knowledge of place and *Tjukurpa* to make sure park business was done the right way. Kunmanara was a strong law man who guided our staff by his generous sharing of his knowledge. He stayed involved with the park for many years, serving both as board member and chairman; his legacy is now being carried on by his daughter Pantjiti, a current board member.

Looking ahead

While operational funding pressures remain, in the year ahead we will focus on tackling many of the biodiversity challenges in our parks and reserves, improving training and employment opportunities for Indigenous staff and helping to provide unique and sustainable nature-based visitor experiences through stronger partnerships with the tourism industry. We have developed a new approach to assessing our performance in managing our parks and reserves, focussing on statements of their values against which programs to protect and conserve those values can be better evaluated.

Planning and preparing for the upcoming IUCN World Parks Congress in Sydney in November 2014 is intensifying. We are working closely with our co-hosts, IUCN and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, to ensure this globally significant event exceeds the expectations of participants and is a credit to all parties.

On a personal note, this is my last annual report as Director of National Parks as I have decided not to seek reappointment to the position I have held since October 1999. It has been a hard decision to leave a job I am so passionate about but, with my current appointment ceasing in December, the time is right to seek new challenges and to allow someone else the opportunity to head this wonderful agency.

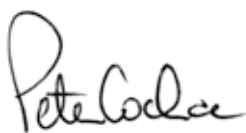
I will leave with treasured memories and great pride in our many achievements. I thank all my colleagues, traditional owners and our partners in industry, government and the non-government sector who over many years have made this position so remarkable, unique, important and rewarding.

Certification

This annual report was prepared in accordance with the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997*, Finance Minister's Orders under that Act and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

The Director's review and the rest of this annual report, except the financial statements for the Australian National Parks Fund and the Auditor-General's report on those financial statements, constitute the Director of National Parks' report of operations.

The holder of the office of the Director of National Parks is responsible under section 9 of the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997* for the preparation and content of the report of operations in accordance with Finance Minister's Orders.



Peter Cochrane
Director of National Parks
3 October 2013



Peter Cochrane signs a Memorandum of Understanding for the World Parks Congress 2014 with Sally Barnes, chief executive of the New South Wales Office of Environment and Heritage. Photo: Office of Environment and Heritage

