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SUBMISSION TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO THE CONSERVATION OF AUSTRALIA'S HISTORIC HERITAGE PLACES

BY THE INTERIM NAMADGI ADVISORY BOARD

The Interim Namadgi Advisory Board would like to make to following submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Policy Framework and Incentives for the Conservation of Australia's Historic Built Heritage Places.

The Board is aware that its involvement with historic heritage is relatively minor compared with management issues surrounding the natural and Aboriginal heritage of Namadgi National Park, but believes its work may reflect one aspect of Australia's conservation of historic places not represented in other submissions to the Inquiry.

1. THE INTERIM NAMADGI ADVISORY BOARD

The Interim Namadgi Advisory Board (INAB) is a government appointed advisory board created in 2001 to provide the ACT Conservator with strategic advice on the planning and management of Namadgi National Park, which occupies a large proportion of the ACT (106,000 hectares).

In the spirit of reconciliation, the Territory and a number of ACT Native Title Claim Groups have entered into the Agreement establishing the INAB, that acknowledges the members of these groups as people with an historical association with the area, and provides for the joint management of the area.

The Agreement provides for these groups:

- to participate in the management of Namadgi National Park;
- to be consulted on specific regional Aboriginal cultural issues; and
- to be consulted on the development of amendments to legislation that will impact on Namadgi National Park.

The Board consists of five Aboriginal and five non-Aboriginal members, appointed by the Minister.

The five Aboriginal members represent the interests of the ACT Aboriginal groups.

The five non-Aboriginal members are appointed in an individual capacity to represent particular areas of expertise relevant to the management of the Park

The Agreement foreshadows the provision of a grant to the Ngunnawal community of a Namadgi Special Aboriginal Lease over the National Park. The Interim Board operates until that lease is finalised, after which a permanent Namadgi Board would he established to oversee the lease.

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The INAB clearly has a central concern with the management of Aboriginal sites in the Park, and the involvement of the Aboriginal community in that management. Historic sites occupy Aboriginal land, and reflect the history of change since Europeans came to the area. The Aboriginal community shared in and was impacted by those changes.

2. HISTORIC HERITAGE WITHIN NAMADGI NATIONAL PARK

Namadgi National Park includes a number of important historic sites.

- Large areas of the Park were pastoral leases and informal grazing areas prior to gazettal of the park. As a result there are a number of homesteads, homestead archaeological sites, ploughlands, woolsheds, and huts in the park dating back as far as the 1830s. A number of the rural industry buildings, including a homestead and four of seven known brumby yards, were destroyed in the January 2003 fires. Two other homesteads were extensively damaged.

- The Brindabella Range was the site of early ski recreation associated with the development of Canberra. Several early ski tow areas, and the remains of the Mount Franklin Chalet, built in 1937-38, and before its destruction in the 2003 bushfires, the oldest ski-club lodge in mainland Australia in its original form.

- The Brindabella Range was also the site for the creation of a number of arboreta, established between the 1920s and 1950s to test various species of trees for possible introduction into Australia for timber production. Unfortunately, five of the six arboreta within Namadgi being assessed for heritage registration and management were destroyed in the 2003 fire. Only Bendora Arboretum and hut survives (1940).

- When Canberra was settled on as the future capital, the boundary of the ACT was surveyed. A series of survey markers survive, remnants of the 1910-15 surveys. A number of timber survey markers and reference trees were destroyed in the 2003 bushfires, but some survive within the park.

- One of the bases for the boundary of the ACT was to provide the future capital with its own water supply. Namadgi National Park contains two water storage reservoirs and dams (Bendora 1961 and Corin 1968).

- During the 1960s the ACT became a key centre for Australia's participation in the US space program. Two tracking stations were established within what is now the park, at Orroral (1964) and Honeysuckle Creek (1967). Only remnants of the former stations remain, together with their sites and landscaping.

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3. MANAGEMENT OF HISTORIC HERITAGE IN NAMADGI NATIONAL PARK

The management of the historic heritage components of Namadgi National Park is undertaken by ACT Parks staff, supported by the Heritage Unit of Environment ACT.

The context for the assessment of some aspects of the historic heritage within Narnadgi is provided by the work of the Australia Alps Liaison Committee, a cooperative body representing the ACT, NSW and Victorian managers of the respective alpine parks, which has sponsored research into various aspects of the cultural heritage of the Alps.

The January 2003 bushfires, which burnt out over 91 % of the park, had a devastating impact. of both the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

Maintenance of some of the huts within the park is undertaken by agreement with the Koskiuszko Huts Association (KHA), a voluntary organisation that has carried out hut maintenance and conservation work within adjacent Koskiuszko National Park for many years. KHA has also, with the agreement of the Board and Environment ACT, reconstructed one hut destroyed in the 2003 bushfires.

The involvement of KHA is relevant to a number of questions asked in the Productivity Commission's Issues Paper of May 2005:

Question - Have shortages of skilled tradespeople acted as an impediment to historic heritage conservation?

Fortunately, KHA has fostered traditional bush timber craftsmanship such as was responsible for the construction of most of the historic structures in Namadgi. As a result KHA can call upon skilled tradespeople and volunteers to work on the maintenance of the huts they are involved with. These skills are also present among the Parks staff.

Question - How do non government organisations contribute to the conservation of historic heritage places?

The work of KHA in providing regular maintenance labour and skills to a range of buildings both facilitates ongoing conservation and relieves the stretched Namadgi budget of part of its otherwise necessary labour costs. KHA also represents the interests of a large sector of the community that has a strong attachment to the bush and the historic structures within it. Their ongoing involvement in the management of the huts ensures that this association remains active and vibrant.

Question - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the involvement of nongovernment organisations in historic heritage conservation?

The involvement of KHA in historic hut maintenance is overwhelmingly a strength in Namadgi management. The administrative costs in facilitating access and materials is minor in relation to the benefits of the voluntary labour in the maintenance program.

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Question - Can the activities of these organisations be improved or expanded?

The involvement of other community organisations is encouraged in the monitoring and management of natural environment in Namadgi, and similarly the involvement of groups in historic heritage monitoring and management is encouraged. The extent of such involvement has to be balanced with the capacity of Parks staff to adequately support and oversee such activities.

4. ISSUES ARISING FROM HISTORIC CONSERVATION IN NAMADGI

There are a number of issues relevant to the Inquiry that arise from the management of historic heritage in Namadgi National Park. These are summarised as follows:

- **Support for contextual studies to assist in the identification and assessment of historic heritage places:**

Even though the range of historic places in Namadgi is reasonable limited, there is a surprising paucity of contextual and comparative studies available to support high quality assessment of places.

Environment ACT operates within a tight budget for its management activities. While some funds have been provided from time to time through the ACT Heritage Grants program, there is a dire need for the Commonwealth to revive a funding program similar to the long-defunct National Estate Grants Program, to promote cross-state and national studies of historic site types and assessment methodologies. These studies in the past have helped all jurisdictions in their conservation of historic heritage, but have not been able to be funded by any one state or Territory.

- **Vulnerability of isolated heritage places**

The January 2003 bushfires through into stark relief the vulnerability of the historic heritage spread through the Alps area. While all National Parks organizations in the states are aware of the particular threats facing isolated and little-known heritage sites, the implications are seldom considered by the urban-dominated heritage agencies in the states.

To some extent an `out of sight, out of mind' syndrome applies here, as it does to a large part of Australia's non-urban heritage, especially its pastoral, agricultural, mining and forestry heritage. As a result it is difficult to get priority for these topics in heritage policy development or conservation funding programs, and so identification, assessment and conservation methodologies languish.

The broadening of the national policy framework and the rejuvenation of a national funding program to address these non-urban issues would be of great benefit to places such as Namadgi.

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