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Peter Cochrane presented trainees Markeeta Freeman, Tony Carter and Ebony Waine with certificates of appreciation for their achievements in the Certificate III in Conservation and Land Management (Lands, Parks and Wildlife) and their contribution to the land management of Booderee National Park.

This is the second annual report by the Director of National Parks based on a more systematic and structured approach to reporting on the management and administration of Commonwealth reserves and how well we achieve our outcomes. Despite these significant improvements in our reporting processes, we clearly still have a long way to go in being able to report concisely on the effectiveness and impacts of our activities. Many of the outcomes of our actions and investments are not easily measured. Nevertheless, we are progressively trying to address this, through our own

analysis, looking at what others are doing, collaborating with interested parties in monitoring what we do, and developing new ways to improve our accountability.

Declining visitor numbers to Kakadu and Uluru, and the fires that closed Booderee at Christmas, placed considerable pressure on the revenue side of the budget. Growing costs associated with ageing infrastructure, maintaining protection of natural and cultural assets, and managing visitor risks kept pressure on the expense side. A direct consequence has been a worse than forecast budget deficit, driven largely from unforeseen expenditure pressures in June in Kakadu, and to a lesser extent Uluru.

Major priorities underway for 2004–05 include a stronger focus on forecasting and reporting of local repair and maintenance budgets, more timely processing of accounts, tighter cost controls, more training, and a higher emphasis on financial accountability.

Against this background many significant achievements were recorded during the year. The following examples are illustrative, and do not do justice to the full range of achievements by individuals and teams across Parks Australia and the Australian Government's protected area estate.

Twin Falls and crocodile risk

Through the outstanding efforts of Kakadu staff and Darwin-based contractors, new visitor infrastructure was planned, designed and installed at Twin Falls gorge in under four months. This enabled the falls to be reopened for the 2004 visitor season in June.

Twin Falls had been closed since 2003 due to significant crocodile risk, attracting considerable tourism industry and media criticism. The Kakadu Board of Management reaffirmed its decision to maintain a ban on swimming in the gorge and base of falls in early 2004.

To re-establish visitor access, the board endorsed new infrastructure, including a removable boardwalk and a shuttle boat service with cultural interpretation by local Indigenous people. This is proving very popular with visitors. A new track to the top of the escarpment above Twin Falls has reopened this spectacular country to tourists, while addressing management and traditional owner concerns about visitor safety.

Growing crocodile presence and risk to visitor safety remain major concerns in the park. In August 2004, an inquest into the crocodile attack and death of a German tourist in Kakadu in 2002 while on a commercial tour examined these issues, including the responsibilities and role of tour guides. The park's crocodile management policy and procedures were thoroughly reviewed following this tragic incident and endorsed by the board in 2004.

Outsourcing to Wreck Bay Aboriginal community

A new lease for Booderee National Park was signed with the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Community Council. The lease now provides an innovative, challenging and more specific framework for progressive contracting out of park management services to the council and its business enterprises. A services contract with Wreck Bay Enterprises Ltd was signed specifying how outsourced park services would be negotiated and managed.

To anticipate and prepare for progressive outsourcing, an operational review about restructuring the park's staffing and functions was commissioned and completed.

New Marine Protected Areas

We committed an ongoing and major investment to developing proposals for new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which will add to the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas.

The major focus in 2003–04 was through the South East Regional Marine Plan consultations under Australia's Ocean's Policy. Candidate MPAs options were identified

for two of the 11 broad areas of interest in the South-east region. The options in these two areas alone exceed 40 000 square kilometres. Intensive stakeholder consultations led by staff of the Marine Protected Areas section carefully and patiently examined and negotiated their way through a complex array of issues and interests to derive MPA options. These options met established scientific criteria, while minimising impacts and costs on commercial interests.

Public consultation processes were completed for a proposed MPA for the Cod Grounds off the New South Wales coast to protect a significant aggregation site for the threatened grey nurse shark. Declaration of this MPA is expected in early 2005.

Ningaloo Marine Park (Commonwealth Waters) was increased in area by 12 per cent following the surrender of two large petroleum leases and their inclusion in the park.

Cane toads in Kakadu

Cane toads in Kakadu currently pose one of the most significant threats to biodiversity in Commonwealth reserves. Detailed monitoring in the park of animal species assessed as a high risk from the threat of cane toads is showing that northern quoll populations are severely impacted, and some goanna species are also at significant risk.

The Australian Government continues to place a high priority on developing a safe control measure and investing in an approach based on disrupting cane toad reproductive processes. Any field application of such a measure is years away, and our current response to cane toad threats will continue to focus on the monitoring of species at risk and the evaluation and implementation of feasible response measures to preserve remnant populations of threatened species.

Wildfire at Booderee

The wildfire in Booderee National Park in December 2003 was of major significance. Approximately 2500 hectares (50 per cent) of the park was burnt. Thankfully, there was no loss of life, personal injuries or damage to major infrastructure in the park.

Some infrastructure such as boardwalks, campground bollards and equipment were severely damaged. In the period between 23 December 2003 and 10 January 2004, the fire was declared a section 44 New South Wales state emergency, and the park remained closed. The emergency was managed very professionally by staff, the local community and relevant authorities.

Some areas of heath, forest and woodland communities were severely burnt. As a result, 250 trees were removed for visitor safety following a risk assessment. It is expected that smaller native fauna populations may be considerably impacted.

A major fauna monitoring programme, which was fortuitously established by the Australian National University well before the fire, will provide valuable information on the impacts and recovery processes over the next five years.

Film and photography at Uluru

The management of commercial filming and photography of Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park is being reviewed by a working group comprising parks staff, traditional owners, filmmakers, photographers and the tourism industry. A first round of improvements to the administration of the permits system was approved by the board in June 2004. Further reforms are under discussion.

Industry has indicated strong support for the reforms proposed by Parks Australia, which are primarily designed to make the permit process easier to understand, less administratively onerous, and more consistent for applicants.

Management plans

A new management plan came into effect during 2003–04 for Pulu-Keeling National Park.

New management plans are under development for Kakadu National Park, the Great Australian Bight Marine Park (Commonwealth Waters), Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs Marine National Nature Reserve, and the Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve. It is expected that these plans will be finalised after public consultation in 2004–05.

Joint management support

Park board and traditional owner support arrangements at Uluru and Kakadu have been bolstered by the appointment in each park of a full-time officer to facilitate consultation, communication and decision making with the parks' traditional owners. These positions are jointly funded with the relevant land council. They also provide improved mechanisms and assurance of compliance with the relevant provisions of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976* and the park leases.

2003–04 was the first full year for each appointee and both have brought significant improvements to the operations of the boards and the parks. Both parks have a new park manager, coincidentally each from the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, and they come with extensive experience in park agencies and working with Indigenous peoples.

I attended five board meetings at Kakadu, three at Uluru and four at Booderee during 2003–04.

Visitors

Some 1.5 million people visited our land-based parks and botanic gardens throughout the year. Nearly 30 per cent of these people came from overseas. It is vital that we provide visitors with the opportunity to have satisfying, educational, safe and rewarding experiences.

We are seeking to enhance these experiences, particularly in Kakadu, which has experienced a steady decline in visitor numbers for five years. We are currently engaged in the articulation of a shared tourism vision for the park between traditional owners and the tourism industry. The new vision seeks to reaffirm Kakadu as an Australian icon of international significance, enhance the capacity of traditional owners to manage the country, better meet the aspirations of visitors, and build a sustainable tourism industry with long-term economic benefits.

Visitor satisfaction results from our northern parks indicate that around 90 per cent of visitors are 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their visit.

Corporate governance

We have continued to strengthen our planning and reporting frameworks. For the first time, a mature financial framework and a robust risk management framework is bedding down. An experienced audit committee oversees these frameworks. The committee has a majority of independent members with wide experience in the public sector and park management.

Weekly meetings of the Parks Australia senior executive and the heads of the business management and strategic development sections provide regular oversight of, and guidance for, operational and strategic issues.

As part of the progressive improvement of our corporate governance structures, and consistent with our risk management programme, a project was initiated to strengthen occupational health and safety throughout the organisation and develop a parks-wide occupational health and safety system.

A significant forward step has been the preparation of a draft capital infrastructure plan. Over 90 per cent of our balance sheet comprises fixed assets and the replacement and maintenance needs of these assets are complex and costly. The capital infrastructure plan will be an essential planning and management tool for 2004–05 and future years.

Business management

In April 2004, the park use fees for Uluru were increased from \$16.25 to \$25.00 (inclusive of GST). This increase will help recoup past operating losses, strengthen our operational capacity, and provide for improved visitor infrastructure at Uluru through new investments.

A programme has been initiated to enhance the reporting of key outcomes and specific programmes across the marine and terrestrial parks. Timely systematic reporting will add to our management effectiveness and accountability.

A new certified agreement was successfully renegotiated for staff of the Department of the Environment and Heritage. Of these staff, 288 are seconded to the Director of National Parks to carry out the agency's activities.

Operational reviews have been scheduled in 2004–05 for Norfolk Island, Uluru Kata-Tjuta and Kakadu national parks and the Darwin office. These reviews aim to better align park and section structure and staffing with current and anticipated operational needs, and the management plans for each park.

On 19 July 2004, the Prime Minister announced that entry fees to Kakadu National Park would be abolished. The announcement resulted in an increase in current and forward year funding estimates to ensure the continued effective management of the park.

World Parks Congress

The 10-yearly (fifth) World Parks Congress was held in Durban, South Africa. It was convened by the World Commission on Protected Areas of the World Conservation Union, with a theme of 'Benefits Beyond Boundaries'.

Workshops, papers and discussions at the congress showed how protected areas are relevant and beneficial to the world's various economic, social and environmental agendas. Australian protected area managers have been at the forefront of many of these issues, and Parks Australia staff played a significant role in the organisation and content of the marine theme for the congress. Four traditional owners from Kakadu and Booderee participated in the congress.

World Protected Areas Leadership Forum

The fifth meeting of this annual forum was held on 14–15 June in Finland. The forum is sponsored and organised by the World Conservation Union. The forum provides an opportunity for the heads of the world's leading park agencies to discuss current and emerging issues.

The forum considered the current review of the World Conservation Union protected area category system. The results of this review will be considered at the union's World Conservation Congress in Bangkok in November 2004.

These meetings also discussed more generally the collaboration and synergies between the work of the World Conservation Union and the Convention on Biological Diversity, particularly given the agreement at the 7th meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of Parties to a protected areas work programme.

Protected Areas Work Programme of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity

In February 2004, the 7th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Malaysia agreed to a Protected Areas Programme of Work. Australia made a significant contribution to the finalisation of this programme of work, which establishes a strong role for the World Conservation Union and an ambitious and challenging agenda for national and regional representative protected area systems.

The coming year

As usual, the coming year presents considerable challenges for the organisation. Funding is tight and expectations are high.

Staff and visitor safety continues to be a high priority. Better reporting and accountability, occupational health and safety, recruitment, and succession planning are other major areas for attention.

A key objective in our jointly managed parks will be to strengthen traditional owner participation, education and training, and to explore opportunities for further contracting out of services to local Indigenous enterprises.

A growing Marine Protected Area estate will generate funding pressures in the medium term. Because of this, we will need to focus more on opportunities for developing cost-effective approaches to managing and monitoring large remote marine parks.

Overall

I would like to again thank all parks staff, members of park boards of management and advisory committees, and the hundreds of volunteers for all their energy, hard work and contributions over the year. It is hard to acknowledge the diverse and outstanding contributions of so many people. I sincerely hope we can continue to provide safe and rewarding experiences for visitors and satisfying jobs and careers for our staff to enable them to make their best contribution to looking after our parks.

About this report

This annual report was prepared in accordance with the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997* and the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act). 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.

Director's report of operations

My report 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, constitutes the Director of National Parks' report of operations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Cochrane', is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Peter Cochrane

Director of National Parks

15 September 2004