

# Director's review



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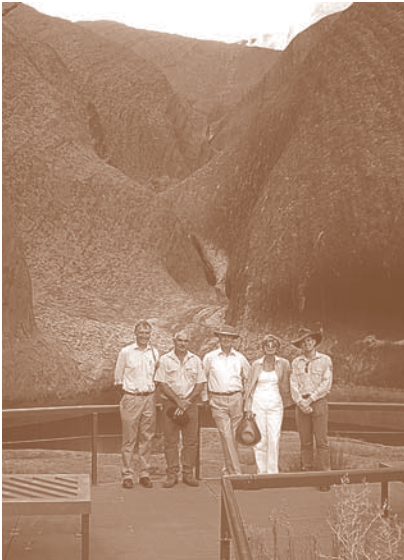
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## The year in review



*The Governor-General Major General Michael Jeffery, with Mrs Jeffery at Mutitjulu waterhole after delivering his pre-Australia Day message at Uluru, also with (from left) Peter Cochrane, board member Graeme Calma and then park manager Tony English.*

The past year has, overall, been one of consolidation for Parks Australia and for management of the Australian Government's protected area estate.

For the first time in several years, there were no significant disruptions by natural or human disasters to our core business. The year was thankfully free of major incidents such as the tragic death of a German tourist in Kakadu from crocodile attack in 2002 and the serious wildfires at Uluru in 2002 and Booderee in late 2003. The solid efforts of park staff in effectively managing the risks inherent in protected area management played no small part in 2004–05 being a comparatively trouble-free year.

Strong financial management and controls saw an operational cash surplus of \$1.4 million for the year, following five years of deficits. The Government's provision of additional funding to compensate for the removal of entry fees at Kakadu National

Park combined with increased revenue at other parks and the lack of significant disruptions were the major contributing factors. Careful budget management and a tight capital budget have enabled us to rebuild our cash reserves to an adequate level. However, the triennial asset base revaluation adversely impacted our accrual position by \$1.6 million, creating a deficit of \$0.207 million for 2004–05.

On the administrative side, the successful introduction of ParkSafe during the year and the ongoing development of our strategic planning and performance framework will underpin a more accountable and effective management effort in future years.

Against this background, many significant achievements were recorded during the year. The State of the Parks report that constitutes the bulk of this annual report presents detailed achievements for each property for which the Director is responsible. A number of short case studies provide more detailed information to highlight the diversity of activities and issues we manage. The following examples illustrate the range of actions and achievements during the year.

## Managing terrestrial reserves

The ongoing recovery of Booderee National Park following the severe Christmas 2003 fires became evident during the year. Damaged campgrounds were reopened and vegetation regrowth has been impressive. A partnership with the Australian National University resulted in an Australian Research Council linkage grant to study the interaction between fire and biodiversity. Initial results show the park in unexpectedly good shape after the fires.

The continued success of the new visitor infrastructure and boat shuttle service at Twin Falls Gorge in Kakadu National Park that were opened in early 2004 has been pleasing. Visitor support has been good and has allowed safe access to the area in a way that minimises risk from crocodile attack. The participation by young Indigenous people as interpreters has been an outstanding success.

The management of commercial filming and photography at Uluru–Kata Tjuṯa National Park has been a contentious issue for some years. New commercial filming and photography guidelines were endorsed by the Uluru Board in 2005 after a wide-ranging review by a working group comprising park staff, traditional owners, filmmakers, photographers and the tourism industry. The new approach includes a more consistent and straightforward permit approval process while protecting traditional owners' rights and cultural interests.

The drought that has affected much of south-east Australia for several years has posed particular difficulties for the Australian National Botanic Gardens in Canberra. Improved efficiencies in water delivery and better-targeted watering have reduced irrigated water use by 25 per cent over the past year. We achieved this without significant detriment to the world's largest and most diverse collection of Australian plants. However, the long-term viability of the collection remains a concern with increasing water prices and supply constraints. We are seeking to have the Gardens included in the scope of an ACT Government submission to the National Water Initiative for a recycled water capability.

On Norfolk Island, the completion of the Mount Pitt road reconstruction project marks the close of a long and difficult project. A case study in the State of the Parks section gives some detail of the complexities that can arise in managing major construction projects in remote environments.

Two conservation-related initiatives in other areas are also worthy of highlight, although neither is an Australian Government reserve. A non-statutory management plan for Calperum and Taylorville Stations in the South Australian Riverland was finalised in collaboration with Austland Services Pty Ltd which manages the properties under contract. And the Director's contract with the Department of

Defence for management of Beecroft Weapons Range at Jervis Bay in New South Wales ceased in August 2004, ending a decade-long conservation partnership. Importantly, the Department has taken over environmental stewardship of this important site, employing our former staff through a smooth transition.

## **Managing marine protected areas**

The Government is committed to a continuing and major investment in developing new marine protected areas through the National Representative System of Marine Protected Areas Programme.

In 2004–05 the major focus was on continuing to develop reserve options in the south-east marine region of Australia's waters, within the 11 broad areas of interest identified in the South-East Regional Marine Plan developed under Australia's Oceans Policy. Planning for reserve identification also commenced in the northern marine planning region. In relation to the proposed declaration of the Cod Grounds off the New South Wales coast as an Australian Government reserve, the Government has funded a structural adjustment package to assist fishers who may be affected by the declaration. It is expected that this package will be implemented in 2005–06.

Research and monitoring studies were conducted to survey the condition of the reserves and to increase the scientific knowledge on which management decisions are made. Generally, while there was some significant coral bleaching, the values for which these reserves were declared are in good condition. Particular studies were made of terrestrial pest species such as ginger ants at Ashmore Reef National Nature Reserve to improve our capacity to understand and control these species.

A highly successful workshop was held to enhance cooperation with state-based park managers who assist in the management of some Australian Government reserves where they abut state marine reserves to ensure consistency of management approach.

Our capacity to ensure compliance with legislative requirements was improved through the development of a database to streamline permit administration and establishment of a single after-hours contact point for marine incident management.

Updated information for visitors to Ashmore Reef and Mermaid Reef National Nature Reserves helped ensure that visitors understand and abide by the reserve rules and enjoy their visit.

## **Species inventories**

We made major progress on preparing inventories of the species listed under environmental legislation that occur in the six terrestrial national parks. Exhaustive

work undertaken over the past two years is now assisting managers to establish priorities for threatened species management, to refine pest management, and to identify research priorities.

## Management planning

The second management plan for the Great Australian Bight Marine Park (Commonwealth Waters) came into effect immediately upon the cessation of its predecessor and a draft plan (the first) for the Heard Island and McDonald Islands Marine Reserve was released for public comment. The latter has now been finalised following the public comment period and is expected to be in effect in the near future.

New management plans are under development for Kakadu National Park and Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs Marine National Nature Reserve. Progress on both plans has been unsatisfactory and their completion is now a major priority.

## Supporting joint management

Our joint management with Indigenous traditional owners of the three mainland parks continues to be the most challenging but at the same time the most rewarding of our activities. Our efforts to increase direct and indirect employment of Indigenous staff and the successful graduation of trainees to full-time ongoing positions represent a positive contribution to the Government's reconciliation agenda. The increasing number of Indigenous tourism business ideas in Kakadu and Booderee is encouraging.

Reviews of the Kakadu and Uluru leases are under discussion with the Northern and Central Land Councils respectively. The Northern Land Council has agreed to arrangements for replacement payments to traditional owners following the removal of entry fees to Kakadu in December 2004 and the consequent loss of traditional owners' share of park revenue.

The Mutitjulu community within Uluru, like many remote Indigenous communities, has suffered entrenched economic and social problems for some time. It is thus very pleasing to report that Parks Australia is contributing (along with many other groups) to an innovative 'working together' project called *Tjungu Waakaripai*, established by the community to deliver long-term change. A case study in the State of the Parks section provides details of the project, which already has seen some early successes.

I attended three board meetings at Kakadu, four at Uluru and three at Booderee during 2004–05. New members were appointed to the Kakadu and Booderee Boards including new chairs for both. On a sad note, the premature passing of a long-serving

and highly respected member of the Kakadu Board was mourned by all those who knew and had worked with him.

## Visitors

Some 1.39 million people visited our terrestrial parks and botanic gardens during the year. High numbers were recorded at Uluru, Booderee and the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

Following wide-ranging public criticism of Kakadu as a tourism destination, the Kakadu Board, in partnership with the Australian and Northern Territory governments and the local tourism industry, developed a new shared vision for the park. In February 2005 our Parliamentary Secretary, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Tourism and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory jointly launched the Board's new vision at Kakadu.

A supporting report, *A Shared Vision for Tourism in Kakadu National Park*, was produced through consultations with traditional owners and the tourism industry, led by the former head of the Australian Tourism Commission, John Morse AM. Respecting Indigenous culture, helping visitors understand and appreciate the beauty of the region and promoting sustainable tourism are its principal goals. A high priority for 2005–06 will be making the vision a reality. The Australian Government is currently finalising a formal response to the report's recommendations.

## Corporate governance

A small group of senior staff further refined the Parks Australia Strategic Planning and Performance Assessment framework and associated performance indicators to facilitate reporting against outcomes set down in the Divisional Plan. The indicators will be used from 2005–06 to report performance at the agency level. The indicator set will be extended during 2005–06. Our specific objective is to be able to report explicitly on how well we do our job. The indicator set is also being employed, or tailored to fit, in new management plans so their progress can be monitored and reported consistently with this overall framework.

An experienced audit committee continued to oversee our planning and performance framework and financial management. The committee has a majority of independent members with wide experience in the public sector and park management. They make an invaluable contribution to the rigour and integrity of our activities.

Weekly meetings of the Parks Australia senior executive and the heads of the business management and strategic development sections provided regular guidance for operational and strategic issues. The executive has been bolstered in the past year

with the recruitment of Bruce Leaver, as a senior adviser, who brings a wealth of experience and expertise in protected area management issues.

A particularly pleasing achievement over the past year has been the successful introduction of ParkSafe, the Parks Australia integrated occupational health and safety management system. ParkSafe addresses the range of hazards arising from the nature of our work and the location of our estate. The appointment of staff dedicated to implementing ParkSafe will allow us to systematically and confidently pursue improved occupational health and safety outcomes.

## **Business management**

On 19 July 2004, the Prime Minister announced that entry fees to Kakadu National Park would be abolished, a commitment confirmed during the 2004 election campaign. Implementation of this commitment was handled most professionally by staff and came into effect in December 2004 in advance of the date nominated by the Prime Minister. The Government provided a budget supplement in current and forward year funding estimates to ensure the continued effective management of the park.

The 2004–2006 certified agreement for staff of the Department of the Environment and Heritage continued to operate effectively. Of these staff, 264 are seconded to the Director to manage terrestrial parks. Another 13 staff of the Department's Marine Division manage marine protected areas under delegation from the Director.

Last year's operational review of Booderee was implemented, producing a workforce aligned with emerging operational needs. The restructure has resulted in improved performance in several areas including entry fee compliance monitoring and incident reporting. The operational review of the Darwin Office is being progressively implemented while planning for reviews at Uluru and Kakadu are under way. This year we also prepared and adopted our first Business Continuity Plan.

## **World Conservation Congress**

I led the Australian Government delegation to the IUCN World Conservation Congress which was held in Bangkok in November 2004. IUCN—the World Conservation Union—comprises government, non-government, institutional members and individuals whose objective is conservation of nature and natural resources.

The World Commission on Protected Areas, one of the six IUCN Global Commissions, is the principal international forum for protected area issues. Australia was again very active in the Commission's deliberations at the 2004 Congress.

Significant outcomes were endorsement of the Durban Action Plan developed at the World Parks Congress in 2003, confirmation of the IUCN protected area management categories system (used extensively in Australia) and support for review of the guidelines for the categories.

### **Tri-National wetlands agreement**

In December 2004 Kakadu hosted a successful visit by Papua New Guinea officials under the Tri-National Wetlands Memorandum of Understanding. The agreement, signed by Australia, Indonesia and PNG in 2002, promotes information-sharing and capacity-building for Kakadu, Wasur National Park in Indonesia and the Tonda Wildlife Management Area in PNG, all of which contain internationally significant wetlands and face similar management challenges. A programme of work is being finalised with three joint activities proposed for 2005–06.

### **Traditional owners' New Zealand visit**

In May 2005 a delegation of traditional owners from Kakadu, Uluru and Booderee travelled to New Zealand at the invitation of Maori Paramount Chief Tumu Te Heu Heu. The trip was a valuable opportunity to share ideas and strategies for Indigenous peoples' involvement in conservation and followed an earlier visit to Uluru by Maori representatives and New Zealand officials.

The visitors were warmly received by their New Zealand hosts and were impressed by the initiatives under way to promote Maori involvement in conservation. There are many lessons we can learn from our New Zealand colleagues in this regard. Our thanks go to Chief Tumu and the New Zealand Department of Conservation for hosting the visit.

### **Formal recognition of achievements**

Members of Parks Australia were recognised in the Department's Australia Day Achievement Awards, including Booderee staff and volunteers who assisted with battling the Windermere fire emergency in the park over Christmas 2003 and Buck Salau's ongoing leadership of weed control and crocodile management in Kakadu. Also recognised were Helen Halliday and Michael Nelson for their contribution to workforce planning and staff relations and to web site design and management.

The Australian National Botanic Gardens won the ecotourism category at the Canberra and Capital Region Tourism Awards for the third year in a row, firmly positioning the Gardens as one of the Canberra region's significant tourist attractions.



*Parks Australia's David Phillips (left) and Peter Coyne (right) with the Comcover award for Excellence in Project Risk Management.*

Our nomination of the Twin Falls case study was placed second in the category 'Excellence in Project Risk Management' in Comcover's 2004 Awards for Excellence in Risk Management. The case study described the measures taken to manage risk from crocodile attack for visitors to this iconic part of Kakadu. This award, together with our participation in Comcover's risk management benchmarking, resulted in a significant

insurance premium discount. Our risk benchmark ranking improved to four stars in 2004–05.

The annual report for 2003–04 received a silver award in the 2005 Australasian Reporting Awards.

## The coming year

As usual, the coming year presents us with many challenges.

Staff and visitor safety continues to be a high priority. The budgetary supplementation provided by the Government following the lifting of entry fees at Kakadu has assisted us to provide enhanced visitor services in the park. Better reporting and accountability, occupational health and safety, recruitment, and succession planning are other major areas for attention. Planning for further marine protected areas will create funding pressures in the medium term.

Strengthening traditional owner benefit from, and participation in, joint management remains a key objective. The ongoing success of contracting arrangements with the traditional owners of Booderee provides a model for further contracting out of services to local Indigenous enterprises.

Two significant future risks that have not yet been fully addressed are worth highlighting. Funding for maintenance and replacement of ageing capital infrastructure in the larger parks require on-going attention, notwithstanding improved arrangements for capital infrastructure planning introduced in 2003–04.

Also, rehabilitation of old uranium mining sites including Coronation Hill in the Gunlom area of Kakadu will require significant additional resources. This issue is of great concern to traditional owners and is an obligation under the park lease.

Other key priorities include responding to the apparent biodiversity loss on Christmas Island, stimulating tourism in Kakadu, working in a whole-of-government context to help address social and community dysfunction in the Muṯitjulu community and making more headway on controlling key threats from weeds and feral animals across our protected area estate.

## Dedicated staff

Finally, it is an honour and a pleasure to work with the committed and talented team that is Parks Australia. Their capabilities, experience and expertise enable us to successfully tackle the most varied challenges—from fire use and control, visitor rescues and incident management to hosting VIPs, policy development, cutting-edge research in conservation biology and taxonomy and managing our diverse interactions with the commercial operators and businesses that work in our parks. Combined with the dedicated contributions from hundreds of volunteers, many of whom have given weeks of work as guides, educators and labourers tackling weeds or track maintenance, a remarkable effort is made to protect our parks and botanic gardens and present them to the public as places of learning, appreciation and discovery.



Peter Cochrane

*Director of National Parks*