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THE ROLE OF PRIVATE RESERVES WITHIN THE NATIONAL RESERVE SYSTEM

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BACKGROUND – A COMPREHENSIVE AND ADEQUATE RESERVE SYSTEM

“Central to the conservation of Australia’s biodiversity is the establishment of a comprehensive and adequate system of ecologically viable protected areas integrated with the sympathetic management of all other areas.” (Commonwealth of Australia 1996). The National Reserve System Program has the primary goal of assisting with the establishment and maintenance of a comprehensive national system of national parks and protected areas for the conservation of Australia’s biodiversity. It has been estimated that \$150 million would be required to establish a comprehensive reserve system in Australia (HoRSCERA 1993) however Howard and Young (1995) estimated that \$500 million would be required for NSW alone. In 1997 the Commonwealth Government allocated \$80 million over five years through the National Heritage Trust to develop the National Reserve System and it has been estimated that the states allocate up to \$5 million per annum annually for acquisition. The framework for ensuring adequacy of the reserve system is based on the Interim Biogeographic Regionalisation of Australia. Despite increases over the past ten years there is still inadequate reservation of many ecosystems.

PRIVATE RESERVES

It is frequently argued that we cannot afford extensions to the public reserve system in Australia. However the private sector is increasingly contributing to the reserve system, a process that has been assisted both by changes to pastoral lease conditions and support from the federal government. An advantage for some private nature reserves is that they may not have the commitment to visitation and recreation, thus do not require the management infrastructure that many state government agencies see as essential in most reserves. Binning and Young (1997) recommended that Protected area networks be established including both public and private land managed for conservation, however, government agencies often regard private reserves as supplementary to, rather than part of, the conservation reserve system. Whilst there is widespread support for the concept of private co-operative arrangements for biodiversity conservation there remains concern regarding long-term security and management. Examples of government support for private land conservation include the NHT National Reserves Program and the NSW West 2000 Plus Enterprise Based Conservation Program.

WEST 2000 PLUS ENTERPRISE BASED CONSERVATION PROGRAM

In western NSW the West 2000 Plus Enterprise Based Conservation Program provides funding to manage areas of western lands leases for conservation. This has recognised the benefit of protection of uncleared land rather than costly attempts to rehabilitate previously cleared land. In a pilot program ten projects have been approved leading to the conservation of 65,000 ha of land with significant biodiversity values. The largest of these is on Sturts Meadows Station.

Sturts Meadows

The Sturts Meadows reservation gives protection to 5,500 ha in the Barrier and Bijerkerno Ranges north of Broken Hill. The area includes significant heritage sites and a range of restricted plants and communities including Curly Mallee, *Eucalyptus gillii* open shrubland, a community of very restricted distribution.

NATIONAL HERITAGE TRUST, NATIONAL RESERVE SYSTEM PROGRAM

In 1998/99 the Commonwealth Government invited the community to actively contribute to the enhancement of the NRS under the National Heritage Trust National Reserve System Program (NRSP)

and in that period proposals for private land protected areas totalling 113,500 ha were approved (CEM 1999). Much of the support was to non-government organisations such as the Trust for Nature (Victoria) and the Australian Bush Heritage Fund. A condition of such funding is that the property must be formally protected, that an agreed management plan be developed and a Private Protected Area Establishment Agreement is made with the Commonwealth Government (Lee and Szabo 1999). A review of NRSP (CEM 1999) concluded that it had made a significant contribution to the NRS, in particular in focussing land acquisition to IBRA regions of high priority.

Nanya Station, far western NSW

The Centre for Environmental Management at the University of Ballarat has for many years, through the goodwill of pastoralists, used pastoral leases in western New South Wales in its environmental management teaching and research programs. Over the past ten years studies have concentrated on the Scotia Country because of its significance as a reference area due to its relatively short pastoral history. Of particular significance is a system of natural salt lakes of which the most extensive is the Scotia discharge complex situated on Nanya Station. A vegetation survey of the Scotia region (Westbrooke *et al.* 1998) highlighted the significance of the area both in terms of the range of communities in relatively intact condition and the occurrence of species and communities of restricted distribution. The survey revealed the presence of 290 species of which nine had either not previously been recorded or have very restricted distribution in western NSW. Seventeen plant communities occur on Nanya Station of which two, *Halosarcia lylei* low open shrubland and *Hemichroa diandra* low open shrubland do not occur elsewhere in NSW. The University has recently purchased Nanya Station with financial support from the National Heritage Trust. This purchase has the multiple purposes of protecting Nanya's significant vegetation, providing a secure base for teaching and research programs both for the University of Ballarat and other interested groups and demonstrating that conservation reserves can be managed effectively on a low budget when there is no requirement for complex infrastructure.

CONSERVATION AND MINING

In both the Sturts Meadows and Nanya Station examples outlined above, the State Government Agency has recognised the conservation significance of the area but has been constrained by mining issues. In NSW it has been difficult to establish national parks in areas subject to mining leases. Voluntary Conservation agreements do not exclude exploration and mining but are subject to normal planning processes. Where private reserves conserve rare plants or communities the planning process may constrain mining activity.

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