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Parks and Wildlife Commission  
Parks Masterplan  
PO Box 496  
PALMERSTON NT 0831

Mode of delivery

Email to: [parkplanning@nt.gov.au](mailto:parkplanning@nt.gov.au)

To Whom it May Concern,

## **Submission in relation to the proposed NT Parks Masterplan (Masterplan)**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission in relation to the NT Parks Masterplan consultation Paper (**Masterplan**).

The Environment Centre NT (ECNT) is the peak community sector environment organisation in the Northern Territory, raising awareness amongst community, government, business and industry about environmental issues and assisting people to reduce their environmental impact and supporting community members to participate in decision making processes and action.

The Northern Territory has some of the most biodiverse and unique landscapes in Australia, and the world. These include the savanna woodlands of the wet/dry tropics, the vast wetlands and escarpment of Arnhem land, the magnificent gorges of Nitmiluk National Park and our pristine marine environments. Most land in the Northern Territory is owned and governed by Traditional Owners, with over 50% of its landmass owned under the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth), and much of the remainder subject to native title rights and interests under the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth). The rich biodiversity of the Northern Territory sustains human and all other life, with our food and water all dependent on healthy, functioning, and resilient ecosystems. It also underpins its economy and social and cultural life through the creation of jobs and sustenance of livelihoods via nature-based tourism and land management, and providing opportunities for camping, bushwalking, cruises, tours, and engagement with Indigenous culture.

NT Parks, reserves and other protected areas are an integral part of the Territory lifestyle and to the health of our ecosystems. They provide essential “ecosystem services” (benefits of nature) including by protecting our rivers, coasts, forests and soils. They are vital to the survival of the Territory’s unique fauna and flora –

found nowhere else in the world – and to our valuable tourism industry. Nitmiluk, Litchfield, Umbrawarra, Douglas River and Daly River, Cutta Cutta Caves, Judbarra, Keep River, Fine Gorge, Ormiston Gorge, Watarrka, and Limmen National Park are all key to the way we understand ourselves as Territorians, and others see us. They are iconic on a national and international scale.

Yet our natural places, including our parks, are under threat on multiple fronts. A new wave of mammalian extinction is affecting northern Australia, even in extensive natural areas managed primarily for conservation.<sup>1</sup> Land clearing is on the rise, destroying critical habitat and accelerating species decline. Feral weeds such as gamba and buffel grass are accelerating their hold on the Territory landscape, causing hot fires that destroy biodiversity and critical habitats, perhaps irreparably. Feral animals such as cats, pigs, buffalo and cane toads have taken over our special places, with significant impacts on flora and fauna. Recent research indicates that Northern Australia's tropical savannas, arid zone and coastal mangroves are three of 19 ecosystems in Australia that meet the criteria of being under collapse.<sup>2</sup> Climate change is projected to have significant impacts on the biodiversity of the Northern Territory by as early as 2030 and extreme impacts by 2070, including increased droughts, changed fire regimes, erratic rainfall and extreme temperatures.<sup>3</sup> Bergstrom et al suggest that it is imperative to understand how different threatening processes combine cumulatively (acting in what they term "threat webs") to further threaten Australia's collapsing ecosystems. As habitats become increasingly fragmented, populations become more vulnerable to other threatening processes, such as climate change, changes in stream flow regimes, predation by invasive species and destructive fires, and they lose the ability to recolonise suitable habitat.

The next Masterplan must address these threats in a meaningful way. ECNT is concerned to note that a primary focus of the consultation paper for the Masterplan is on economic development, rather than conserving wildlife and biodiversity in our parks. The primary motive for managing our finest natural areas should not be income generation as is suggested in the consultation paper. It should be conservation. Maintaining parks should not be viewed in opposition to productivity, protected biodiversity is innately productive.

Our prized tourism industry will be in dire straits if park management programs are under resourced and neglected. If we are to keep attracting visitors to our parks and reserves and protect our lifestyle for future generations, we must invest sufficient funding and personnel in protecting the natural values of these places. The consultation paper places great significance on activating business and economic opportunities. It fails to acknowledge that you can't market a park when its ecosystems are collapsing.

NT Parks form part of the national reserve system, which are a safety net against our biggest environmental challenges and a keyway in which Australia's biodiversity is conserved. Many of the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.natureaustralia.org.au/content/dam/tnc/nature/en/documents/australia/Into-Oblivion.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Bergstrom et al. 2021. "Combating ecosystem collapse from the tropics to the Antarctic." *Global change biology* 27(9):1692-1703.

<sup>3</sup> <https://publications.csiro.au/rpr/pub?pid=csiro:EP154327>.





ECNT is extremely concerned by the suggestion, in the consultation paper, that the Territory Government seems to lack the financial resources to be able to properly manage NT Parks. Funding and resourcing our parks is a fundamental function of government. ECNT calls for an increase in funding of the Parks and Wildlife Commission to ensure that this function is adequately discharged. It is not appropriate to “consolidate”, “rationalise” or “privatise” parks as suggested in the consultation paper given the environmental challenges that we face. Nor is it appropriate for the government to outsource its biodiversity conservation, management and monitoring functions to private entities. Our parks need well-funded government programs and more rangers to do their job, so our iconic places can survive and thrive into the future. This function must be performed by government, and cannot be outsourced or avoided.

ECNT also notes that the previous masterplan was a “Parks and Conservation Masterplan” and sought to address not only management of NT Parks, but also conservation of the Territory more broadly. Specifically, the masterplan sought to conserve biodiversity across the vast areas of pastoral and Aboriginal land, and the marine environment. ECNT is concerned that there is no Territory-wide conservation plan, nor one proposed, particularly given the dire threats that our biodiversity is facing.

In sum, the next Parks Masterplan must:

1. Commit the Northern Territory Government to allocating sufficient resources to properly manage existing Territory Parks to conserve biodiversity values, and to acquire new areas.
2. Consistent with the Convention Biological Diversity draft target, commit to bringing at least 30% of each of the Territory’s bioregions on land and sea under ecologically representative, well connected, effectively and equitably managed systems of protected areas, with an emphasis on key biodiversity areas and critical habitats for threatened species.
3. Commit to incorporating the Northern Territory’s “sites of conservation significance” within the Territory Parks estate.
4. Set out a plan to respond to the impacts of climate change in relation to frequent hot and damaging fires, soil erosion and changes to the water table.
5. Set out a plan to respond to Northern Australia’s mammalian extinction crisis.
6. Set out a plan to respond to recent research which suggests that three of the Territory’s key ecosystems (our savannas, arid landscapes and mangroves) are collapsing.
7. Set out a plan to respond to the threat of ecosystem-modifying weeds like Gamba Grass in the Top End and Buffel Grass in the Centre.
8. Set out a plan to respond to the threat of predation from feral animals.

In addition, the Northern Territory Government must develop a conservation strategy for the Territory’s biodiversity as a matter of urgency.

If you have any questions in relation to ECNT’s submission, please contact Kirsty Howey on [kirsty.howey@ecnt.org](mailto:kirsty.howey@ecnt.org) or Shar Molloy on [shar.molloy@ecnt.org](mailto:shar.molloy@ecnt.org).

Yours faithfully,



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Co-Director



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