Joint Management Arrangements for Namadgi National Park

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In April 2001, Namadgi National Park became the first of Australia’s alpine national parks to be subject to joint management arrangements, following the endorsement of an agreement between the ACT Government and a number of local Aboriginal groups. The agreement provides for the granting of a Namadgi Special Aboriginal Lease and for the participation of the Ngunnawal community in the management of the park.

The paper considers the progress that has been made to date in the implementation of joint management and considers the prospects for effective joint management in the future.

It is published as it was presented at the Mountains Conference in Jindabyne in November 2002. There is a postscript.

Aboriginal Australians have had an association over many thousands of years with the region around and including what is now known as the Australian Capital Territory. Since colonisation of the region, this association has been constrained, to the detriment of Aboriginal people.

In the spirit of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, the Australian Capital Territory Government has entered into an Agreement with members of the Ngunnawal Aboriginal community that provides for joint management of Namadgi National Park by the parties to the Agreement.

The Agreement was signed on 30 April 2001.

Under the Agreement, the Ngunnawal community has been offered a Special Aboriginal Lease over Namadgi National Park. The term of the Special Aboriginal Lease will be 99 years with an option for renewal at the end of that term.

Negotiations on the detailed terms and conditions and the grant of the Special Aboriginal Lease are dependent on the resolution of a native title claim over the Territory that is currently before the Federal Court. The claim is by a group that has declined an invitation to be a party to the Agreement.

The parties to the Agreement have agreed on interim arrangements that apply until the native title claim is withdrawn or determined. Under these interim arrangements, the Aboriginal parties to the Agreement:

• have been acknowledged as people with an historical association with the area that is now Namadgi National Park;
• have the right to participate in the management of Namadgi;
• have the right to be consulted on specific regional cultural issues; and
• have the right to be consulted on the development of any legislation that will impact on Namadgi National Park.

Interim Namadgi Advisory Board

The most important element of the interim arrangements has been the setting up of the Interim Namadgi Advisory Board. The Board consists of five Aboriginal and five non-Aboriginal members. The Aboriginal members represent the interests of the parties to the Agreement. The non-Aboriginal members are appointed in an individual capacity because of their specific expertise. Initial appointments to the Board were made in August 2001.

The role of the board is to provide advice to the Conservator of Flora and Fauna:

• in the preparation of a new draft Plan of Management for Namadgi National Park
• in relation to consent decisions by the Conservator made in accordance with the provisions of the Nature Conservation Act 1980
• at the request of the Conservator, in relation to emerging and current issues related to the management and protection of Namadgi National Park.

The board also provides a forum for its Aboriginal members to raise issues of interest and concern to the Ngunnawal community that they believe may be able to be addressed through joint management.

The board’s terms of reference require it to meet at least six times each year. The board is able to form working groups with membership drawn, in part, from outside the board.

In preparing advice for the Conservator, board members are expected to achieve consensus on the issues being addressed.

In the event that the board cannot reach agreement, the views of each member would be set out separately. To date, consensus has been reached on all issues addressed by the board.

Participation in the Draft Plan of Management for Namadgi National Park

The board’s primary task is to work with Environment ACT on the preparation of a new plan of management for Namadgi National Park. The plan will replace the existing 1986 Plan of Management.

In April 2002, the board released a discussion paper that addressed the park’s values and sought community views on the relative importance of these values and on key issues that need to be addressed in the new plan. Some seventy community submissions were received in response to the discussion paper. The board has subsequently considered issues raised in the submissions with a view to facilitating public workshops on issues identified in the submissions as being of most interest or most likely to lead to conflict between park users. The board is expecting to release a draft plan for community comment in mid-2003.
Ngunnawal culture – acknowledgment, respect and celebration

Environment ACT has taken the view that for joint management to be successful, it must not only involve the exercise by the parties of rights set down in the Agreement but also acknowledgment, respect and celebration of Ngunnawal culture.

Non-Aboriginal board members and Environment ACT staff who work with the board have all undertaken intensive Cross Cultural Awareness Training that gives them a better understanding of Aboriginal history and heritage, including issues of identity, racism, cultural difference and protocol and communication. The training is designed to be emotionally challenging rather than intellectually comfortable.

Environment ACT has replaced all of Namadgi’s entry and interpretative signage with new signage that properly acknowledges the long association of Aboriginal people with the area that is now national park. The signs include statements of welcome from the Ngunnawal community and introduce Ngunnawal language to visitors to the park. They also introduce Ngunnawal elders and their families to the park’s visitors with brief statements by elders and others about what Namadgi means to them.

The project has involved close consultation with the Ngunnawal community, the Ngunnawal Language Centre and local Ngunnawal artists.

Joint management has also resulted in an increased emphasis on Aboriginal culture in Environment ACT’s activity programs. Aboriginal musicians, dancers, artists, crafts practitioners and story tellers actively participate in regular public events held at Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and in one off celebrations such as the Festival of the Bogong and the ACT Mountain Challenge. Ngunnawal presenters regularly run ranger guided activities and school holiday programs based around aspects of their culture and heritage.

Economic benefits of joint management

The grant of the Namadgi Special Aboriginal Lease will not confer or create any lease or licence within the meaning of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991 and there will be no payment of rent to the leaseholders.

However, the ACT Government is committed to provide opportunities for the Ngunnawal community to gain economic benefit from joint management.

Aboriginal members of the Interim Namadgi Advisory Board receive sitting fees at a level determined by the ACT Remuneration Tribunal.

An Aboriginal cultural heritage specialist has been recruited to take responsibility for Environment ACT’s interpretation and education programs, for the proper integration of cultural heritage and land management practices and for developing initiatives for employment and work experience for Aboriginal people.

A number of young Aboriginal people have been recruited to work as Trainee Rangers or Park Workers or in Environment ACT’s Visitor Information Centres.

Environment ACT has also provided part time employment to local Aboriginal people to assist with the running of ranger guided and schools activities. These activities are in great demand from the broader community, keen to receive information about Aboriginal culture presented to them by Aboriginal people.

To allow Environment ACT to expand these activities, a program has been developed that will provide young Aboriginal people with cultural interpretation training to allow them to be employed on a seasonal basis to assist with ranger guided activities. The program will commence in early 2003.

Environment ACT has also set up a volunteer program that will allow young Aboriginal people to gain work experience through participation in park care activities. The program’s first project is the upgrade of a walking track to an Aboriginal rock shelter in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve with similar projects to follow in Namadgi National Park. The projects are being funded through an ACT Government Community Development Program.

Aboriginal board members are also keen to assist the local Aboriginal community to gain economic benefit in ways other than through permanent or contract employment within Environment ACT.

Companies bidding for contract work in Namadgi National Park are now required to include with their tenders details of the extent to which they employ Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal consultancy firms with the necessary skills are invited to submit proposals for available consultancy work. Ngangaana Wiradjuri has successfully bid for work under these arrangements and Environment ACT is currently finalising the appointment of an Aboriginal facilitator to conduct public workshops on recreation, post plants and animals and fire management as part of the development of the new Namadgi draft Plan of Management.

Aboriginal board members and Environment ACT are currently looking at the merits of providing assistance to the Ngunnawal community to set up a small business that could tender for some of the contract work in Namadgi that is available on an annual basis, such as weed and feral animal control.

Tentative steps have been taken to determine whether or not there might be financially viable opportunities for the community to become more actively involved in Aboriginal cultural tourism, nature based tourism and food tourism.

Implementation of joint management arrangements

Joint management is working for Namadgi National Park and some significant achievements have been made during the eighteen months since the Agreement was signed. It will, however, take a number of years for joint management to be fully effective.

Namadgi differs from many other jointly managed national parks in that the association of the Aboriginal community with the area that is now the park has been so constrained since colonisation that much of the community’s traditional knowledge of this area has been fragmented. As a result, there is much to be done to restore ‘connection to country’ and to transfer the community information held by Environment ACT about the community’s sites and places.

There are still tensions between the preoccupation of non-Aboriginal land managers with decision making, project schedules and output reporting and the desire of the Aboriginal board members to take the time needed to consult with their community so that decisions made are properly informed. At times, the Ngunnawal community rightly complains about feeling excluded because of the use by non-Aboriginal people of technical language, jargon and acronyms.
The inability to progress negotiations on the permanent joint management arrangements because of the unresolved native title claim over Namadgi is of concern to the Ngunnawal community as is the lack of a statutory basis for these arrangements.

At a philosophical level, cultural differences can give rise to conflicting viewpoints that are not always easy to reconcile. For example, the Board is currently debating options for either removing or redefining the term ‘wilderness’ in the new Namadgi draft plan of management. Many local Aboriginal people take offence at the use of a term that makes invisible the occupation and settlement of Namadgi by their ancestors. The difficulty for the Board is how best to address this issue whilst giving proper recognition to the energy invested by conservation groups in lobbying for declaration of wilderness areas over a long period of time.

The understandable focus of the Aboriginal board members on improving social and economic outcomes for their community means that they are not always able to devote as much attention to cultural aspects of joint management as they would like. Their available energies are, at times, diverted to addressing Aboriginal disadvantage in the fields of health, housing, education and justice. As leaders of their community, they are in great demand for service on other ACT Government representative bodies.

The success of joint management to date is founded on the high level of trust and goodwill that has been built up between the parties to the Agreement. With a number of key projects completed or underway, the Aboriginal board members have begun to take a more strategic view of what they would like to achieve from joint management in the longer term.

Their goal remains to use joint management as a mechanism for improving social and economic outcomes for their community in a way that does not conflict with the values for which Namadgi National Park is treasured. They believe that economic security is critical to the future of their community and that, without this, the community will be less inclined to engage fully with Environment ACT on the joint management of Namadgi National Park.

The first steps taken in support of this goal have been modest but significant. The view of the Aboriginal board members is that joint management can be a strong unifying force for their community. They believe that it is now appropriate for joint management to be put in place in throughout all of the Australian Alps National Parks.

For Environment ACT, joint management has forced its land managers to rethink the way in which they do business but has resulted in a richer understanding of Namadgi National Park for them at both a professional and personal level. The reaction to joint management by visitors to the park and the broader Canberra community has been overwhelmingly supportive. This positive experience suggests that it might now be timely for other jurisdictions to consider the implementation of joint management arrangements for their alpine national parks.

Postscript

Since this paper was written, the focus of those involved in the joint management arrangements for Namadgi National Park has been on the recovery effort needed following the January 2003 bushfires (which burnt over 90% of Namadgi) and on the preparation of a new draft plan of management for Namadgi. As a result, there has been limited progress on the implementation of permanent joint management arrangements.

The importance for the Ngunnawal community of employment and training opportunities and celebration of culture remain. Environment ACT has recently created new Indigenous identified positions in its Parks and Conservation Service and Heritage Unit and is finalising recruitment of its second intake of Aboriginal trainees. There will be a third intake of trainees in 2006. Work is continuing on documenting and presenting Ngunnawal stories and on conducting Ngunnawal cultural camps in Namadgi.

Endnotes

1. Namadgi National Park is the Australian Capital Territory's largest protected area. With an area of 106,000 hectares, it represents 46% of the Territory's land area.


3. At November 2002, members of the interim Namadgi Advisory Board were: Matilda House (Aboriginal Joint Chair); Geoff Butler (non-Aboriginal Joint Chair); Roslyn Brown (Aboriginal member); Valda Connors (Aboriginal member); Fred Monaghan (Aboriginal member); Agnes Shea (Aboriginal member); Dr Sue Briggs (NSW NPWS Senior Research Scientist); Dr Michael Pearson (Heritage Consultant); Dianne Thompson (representing Conservation Group interests); and Geoff Wells (representing the Interests of the ACT Conservator of Flora and Fauna).

4. The position of Conservator of Flora and Fauna, established under the provisions of the Nature Conservation Act 1980, is currently held by the Executive Director, Environment ACT.

5. Environment ACT is the ACT Government's environment and cultural heritage management agency.