



**Submission to Department of the
Environment and Heritage on National
Reserve System Programme Evaluation -
2006**

Inland Rivers Network
Suite 504 32 York St
SYDNEY NSW 2000
Tel (02) 8270 9904
Fax (02) 8270 9988
Email: coordinator@irnsw.org.au
Website: www.irnsw.org.au

Introduction

The Inland Rivers Network (“IRN”) is a coalition of environment groups and individuals concerned about the degradation of the rivers, wetlands and groundwaters of the Murray-Darling Basin. It has been advocating for the conservation of rivers, wetlands and groundwater in the Murray-Darling Basin since 1991. Member groups include the Australian Conservation Foundation; the Nature Conservation Council of NSW; the National Parks Association of New South Wales; Friends of the Earth; Central West Environment Council; and the Coast and Wetlands Society.

IRN appreciates the opportunity to comment on the 2006 National Reserve System Program (NRS) Evaluation. We have not been able to fully address the terms of reference, but the submission focuses on the value and importance of freshwater areas as aspects of the program, and highlights the need to substantially enhance the freshwater aspect of the NRS program to enable it to be more appropriate and effective.

Comments on the NRS Program

IRN supports the NRS as a critical and cost effective program for achieving Australia's biodiversity conservation goals. However, IRN would like to emphasise that freshwater ecosystems continue to be a major gap within the national reserve system, including river channels, anabranches, wetlands, ephemeral lakes and groundwater dependent ecosystems. This is despite the fact that Part One of the Australian Guidelines for Establishing the National Reserve System (Environment Australia, 1999) states that:

“The NRSP focuses on ensuring rapid and significant improvements in the terrestrial reserve system. Its main priority addresses the key gaps in comprehensiveness at the national scale.”

An IUCN resolution passed at the World Conservation Congress (Bangkok November 2004) recognises the importance of protecting freshwater ecosystems and calls on all countries to establish protected areas for all freshwater ecosystems, including rivers, lakes, wetlands, estuaries and groundwater dependent ecosystems (see the box below for an extract of the resolution).

The World Conservation Congress at its 3rd Session in Bangkok, Thailand, 17-25 November 2004:

1. RECOMMENDS that all States:

(a) establish protected areas representative of all freshwater ecosystems, including but not limited to riverine, lacustrine, wetland, estuarine and groundwater dependent ecosystems, in cooperation with local communities and resource users, so as to safeguard the biodiversity of each of their freshwater ecosystems, and set targets for protection where useful and appropriate;

(b) establish their systems of freshwater protected areas within an integrated river basin management approach taking advantage of the full range of governance types;

(c) as part of their overall programs, establish viable freshwater protected areas, to ensure the inclusion of areas which meet the protection criteria for IUCN Categories I and II.

(d) that are parties to the CBD implement the targets adopted in the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas 'COP VII/28' February 2004, in relation to freshwater habitat, including the enhanced implementation of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; and

(e) develop and implement national action plans on these issues.

2. RECOMMENDS that the World Commission on Protected Areas develop guidance on the application of the IUCN Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories in freshwater environments.

3. RECOMMENDS FURTHER that IUCN strengthens its work with the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in order to facilitate better management and assessment, monitoring and reporting on freshwater protected areas, including through application of IUCN's Guidelines for Protected Area Management Category System.

Recommendation 1.

It is imperative that the NRS includes freshwater protected areas as a priority component for ensuring a comprehensive national reserve system. It is heartening to see that more recent NRS documents are beginning to reflect the need to protect freshwater areas. Direction 7 from section 2.3 (Biodiversity Targets For The NRS CAR Reserve System) in the *Directions for the National Reserve System: A Partnership Approach (Natural Resource Management Ministerial Council 2005)* requires that:

“The current understanding of freshwater biodiversity in relation to CAR to be reviewed and an agreed approach finalised, which may include future amendments to the NRS Scientific Guidelines, to ensure freshwater ecosystems are appropriately incorporated within the NRS.”

This was to have been achieved by 2005. Unfortunately it would appear that this Direction has not yet been achieved.

Although this is a valuable way forward IRN asserts that urgent action is needed to protect and rehabilitate freshwater ecosystems across Australia.

Recommendation 2

IRN calls for a substantial funding program to be provided to enable DEH to address the above gap and to implement the framework that should be developed as a result of Direction 7, this being an integral part of the next step in the NRS program.

IRN and ACF Vision for a Framework under the NWI for the Protection of High Conservation Value Freshwater Areas in Australia

River and aquifer protection requires a range of tools reflecting the complexity of the issues facing riverine ecosystems. Developing a system of protected, high-conservation value freshwater areas is an essential plank in a good planning framework and would provide in-situ protection of areas from externally driven problems, as well as an opportunity to strengthen broader catchment management tools.

Recommendation 3

That the attached IRN/Australian Conservation Foundation paper “*Vision for a Framework under the NWI for the Protection of High Conservation Value Freshwater Areas in Australia*”, proposal for be adopted as the mechanism through which the NRS Program will be able to more comprehensively fulfil its obligations. The paper stresses the value of an overarching consistent framework to guide comprehensive protection and management of high conservation value freshwater areas.

Freshwater Protected Area Conference

The *Freshwater Protected Areas – new and existing tools for conserving freshwater ecosystems in Australia* Conference was held in September 2004, Sydney (jointly hosted by WWF and IRN) and was attended by almost 100 people over two days, including highly respected key note speakers and practitioners of freshwater ecosystem management. The conference brought together a diversity of speakers and participants from around Australia, including farmers, fishers, conservation groups, Indigenous people, government officials from all jurisdictions and researchers.

The Conference consensus *Statement and Recommendations* set out a clear rationale for conserving freshwater ecosystems of high conservation value and aspects of a way forward. A copy of the summary brochure is attached.