

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES OF CROWN LAND AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE CROWN LAND REVIEW

IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES OF CROWN LAND

The Crown lands estate, which covers millions of hectares of NSW, offers a range of important conservation values; from providing remnant vegetation and habitat for threatened species in highly cleared landscapes, habitat connectivity and irreplaceable coastal values.

Specifically:

- Crown lands encompass *93,900 hectares of wetlands*, including two Ramsar listed wetlands, and provide habitat for at least *23 migratory bird species protected under international agreements*;
- Crown lands are dominated by *ecosystems* that have always been a very high priority for conservation. Of the *193 ecosystems* that occur within Crown leases, *143 are endangered, vulnerable or poorly reserved*;
- *Vegetation* on Crown lands is of a suitable size and configuration to provide *major habitat refuges*, important additions to existing reserves and *vital landscape connectivity*;
- Crown lands provide *habitat for at least 71 threatened plant species and 111 threatened fauna species*;
- Crown lands include numerous *areas of outstanding 'iconic' value to nature conservation* in NSW (the Macquarie Marshes, Gwydir Wetlands, and Lowbidgee Floodplain, etc);
- Over 30 million hectares of Crown Land in the Western Division have land management arrangements to protect the fragile soils and water sources in the arid landscape
- In urban areas, Crown land parcels can contain *important remnant vegetation* and can be *critical to the survival of resident, itinerant and migratory birds and other animals*¹.
- Many *Sydney Harbour foreshore reserves* are Crown reserves.

¹ National Parks Association of NSW, *Our Heritage Under the Hammer, The imminent fire sale of Crown leasehold lands in NSW, their outstanding conservation values, and how they can be saved* (2005)

CONCERNS WITH CROWN LAND MANAGEMENT REVIEW

In June 2012, the Government announced it was undertaking a comprehensive review of the NSW Crown land estate. The process for the review was flawed because the Government did not:

- a) Effectively engage the community through genuine and meaningful community consultation,
- b) Undertake a robust assessment of the environmental, cultural and social values of our public land assets.
- c) Provide a level of transparency commensurate with Government policy

The White Paper proposes a significant shift in the way Government will manage Crown land in the future. This is most evident when you look at the proposed changes to the objects of the *Crown Lands Act 1989*. There is a noticeable move away from environmental protection and conservation of natural resources as key objects of the *Crown Lands Act*, towards management through business case development and emphasis on economic outcomes.

Further, there is no mention of the principles of ecologically sustainable development despite the *Western Lands Act 1901* providing that lands in the Western Division must be used in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

The White Paper also proposes the transfer of management of some Crown land to local councils, under the *Local Government Act*. It is not clear how this proposal links in with current review of the Local Government Act or what procedures will be put in place to ensure both a transparent process for the transfer of land and the future management of that land, by local councils.

Given the significant environmental values of Crown lands, the Minister for the Environment should play a key role in ensuring that our Crown land estate is effectively managed in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The NSW government must listen to broad community concern and in particular:

- Undertake a robust and complete assessment of the environmental, cultural or social values of its Crown land assets.
- Undertake further, broad community consultation on the important issues of Crown land management in NSW.
- Ensure that the existing objectives of managing Crown land for environment protection and conservation of natural resources are retained and that Crown land is managed in accordance with the principles of ecologically sustainable development.
- Ensure that all Crown Land with important environmental, cultural or social values be maintained as public land.