



ANBG Management Plan Submission by the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens, March 2009

Preparation of the new ANBG Management Plan is happening at a crucial time in the history of the Gardens and the Friends welcome the opportunity to contribute. There is no doubt that the Gardens has suffered in recent years. This is most visible in the degraded condition of parts of the living collection. There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, including staffing and funding constraints. The Friends have, in other contexts, drawn attention to declining staff numbers over many years. Gardens' management said the 2007-08 Budget was *not sufficient to cover existing functions and staffing structure*.

Our intention in these comments is not to dwell on present problems. Nevertheless, a new management plan needs to face the reality of present conditions and plan for recovery. There are some indications that a corner may have been turned and the Friends are more confident about the Gardens' future than we were 18 months ago.

We note at the outset that the existing management plan made many sound commitments, such as developing a theme on the evolutionary origins of Australian plants, redeveloping the old nursery site and creating a new Visitors Centre in a more appropriate location. Those, and many other, sensible ideas have not been acted upon. It is vitally important that the new management plan addresses the necessary commitment, especially by Government, to ensure the delivery of such good proposals.

Vision and mission

While the current mission statement, *to grow, study and promote Australian plants*, may be in need of revision, the exclusive emphasis on Australian plants should continue.

In discussions about the new management plan a number of priorities for the ANBG have been proposed, including

- focusing on biodiversity conservation and preservation
- renewing the horticultural research program, especially into the effects of climate change and the adaptation of native plants to changed climatic conditions
 - we can't know the best way to contribute to these problems unless high quality data collection and research gets underway without delay and this continues over many years (ie long term commitment is necessary)
- the ANBG playing a national co-ordinating role in respect of the input of Australian botanic gardens to the major issues
- strengthening the role of the gardens as a national institution to showcase native plants and educate people about them, especially young people.

The Friends see a lot of merit in these proposals, providing:

- additional funding is obtained – the Gardens' present budget, as stated above, is inadequate for present programs
- it is acknowledged that the primary aim of the Gardens is to be a world-class botanic garden, with a well-maintained and interpreted living collection, representative of the Australian flora; and
- the emphasis on research is matched by a long-term commitment to additional funding which recognises the timeframe for such research activities, and is not at the expense of education and promotion.

Our inclination would be to give more emphasis to the promotion element, to encourage visitors, ensure their education and widen the Gardens' influence through education products and programs available over the internet or other media, perhaps in collaboration with other botanical gardens. This would be consistent with the direction of other gardens and cultural heritage institutions over the last two decades.

- **The primary aim of the Gardens is to be a world-class botanic garden, with a well-maintained and interpreted living collection, widely representative of the Australian flora**
- **The research capacity of the Gardens must be re-established, along with a long term commitment to adequate funding, with adaptation of native flora to climate change as a major component of such research**
- **The Gardens should play a central role in coordinating the resources of botanic gardens and researchers around Australia**
- **Emphasis must be given to promoting the Gardens as a place to visit and learn and to establishing it as one of the key national institutions in Canberra**

Living collection

The Friends reject the notion that *the goal of the Gardens to display the national collection of Australian native plants is now out of date*. We consider that the living collection should be a comprehensive representation of the Australian flora, subject to the limitations of Canberra's climate and local soils.

Interpretation of the Australian flora should be an important principle in selecting which plants to grow. It has been suggested that interpretation of the Gardens should focus on it being a *gateway to the Australian flora*. We strongly support this view. The aim should be for visitors to gain an understanding of the characteristic features of Australian plants, their historical origins and geographic variation. The Gardens should be an integral part of *the National Capital experience*, in which visitors to the various institutions of the national capital gain a greater understanding of Australian history, society, culture and the land itself, including its unique flora.

This does not preclude other principles also operating in the choice of plants to grow. One principle might be to include plants and plant communities whose continued existence is threatened by, for example, global warming and changing land use. Another could be to grow a greater number of alpine and cool-climate plants. It would not be acceptable for the living collection of the national botanic garden to be other than what the title clearly implies: a collection widely representative of the nation's flora.

Plant selection should also be guided by aesthetic factors. In his 1935 report which led to the creation of the Gardens, Dr BT Dickson strongly emphasised the need for the proposed Gardens to be developed with

a balance between the scientific and the aesthetic.

This has been done spectacularly well. The citation for the Gardens' listing on the Commonwealth Heritage List states that

... the Gardens are important for the aesthetic characteristics valued by the community,

and specifically mentions

the attractive park landscape with a well balanced integration of spaces and form; interest from the vegetation details of the variety of native species; contrasts of small and large plants, waterform, rockform and colour...

This is consistent with our view of the importance of attracting visitors and educating them.

The new management plan needs to recognise the degraded condition of parts of the Gardens and propose how these areas should be restored.

A key factor to recognize is that maintaining the living collection is only part of the picture. Using it effectively for research and education is equally important.

- **The Gardens should be a *Gateway to Australia's Native Flora*, to educate visitors and the wider community**
- **Areas of the Gardens that are degraded must be restored in line with the priorities of the new Management Plan**

Major projects

The Friends accept that, of major infrastructure projects at the present time, top priority should be given to delivering non-potable water to the Gardens. We urge that second priority should be to redevelop the old nursery site. The previous management plan recognised the need for this redevelopment, but unfortunately this was not acted upon. It is unacceptable that this large area at the very heart of the Gardens has been left derelict for years. We have not yet established strong views about particular uses for the site, but consider it should be a feature that will attract many visitors to walk this far into the Gardens. The Management Plan should restate the priority to redevelop the old nursery site and, at the very least, recommend an urgent consultative process to reach agreement on the long term use of the site.

Another high priority major project should be a new Visitor Centre. The present Centre is badly sited, and is totally bypassed by many visitors. The ideal arrangement would be for all visitor access to the Gardens to be through a new Visitor Centre. Planning for this project should consider the feasibility of including a new display glasshouse. The present glasshouse is so far into the Gardens that it deters many visitors from going there. In addition, the access along a bitumen road is aesthetically uninspiring. Such a centre should also have much greater exhibition space than is currently available. Consideration should be given to better management, display and research facilities for the orchid collection, partly in the context of a new display glasshouse.

- **Top priorities for infrastructure projects must include securing the water supply, redevelopment of the old nursery site into a major feature, construction of a new Visitor Centre located as the entrance to the Gardens and a new display glasshouse well located for visitors**

Governance

Twice in its history the Gardens has had an Advisory Council. The reasons both were discontinued are not clear and in any case might not be relevant to the present time. Most major institutions comparable to the Gardens have such bodies to provide independent expert and community advice to management and to play a key role in setting and delivering long term priorities. The Friends urge that such a body be created again at the earliest possible time.

In addition, the Friends believe that the Gardens should be restructured with independence from Parks Australia. It is especially important that it have its own budget line. At present the Parliament appropriates a single budgetary line for Parks Australia, of which the Gardens is a part. That amount is divided up internally. We believe the Gardens is essentially a national institution, and quite different from most of the other institutions under Parks Australia (which are essentially mainstream national parks). Its financial fortunes should not be hidden away but presented to Parliament and the public like those of other national institutions. The Parliament should be told the precise level of government funding being given to the Gardens. The Government should be accountable to the Parliament for this. In the last year, two comparable Canberra national

institutions, Old Parliament House and the National Archives, have been reconstituted as *executive agencies*. We urge that consideration should be given to reconstituting the ANBG as an independent statutory authority but at the very least the executive agency model should be adopted as soon as possible. Not only would this allow proper scrutiny and understanding of the funding for the gardens but it would open up possibilities for significant outside funding to be sought, as is the case for other major botanic gardens around Australia and throughout the world.

- **An Advisory Council should be established without delay to provide independent expert and community advice to management**
- **The Gardens should be restructured as an independent statutory authority or, at the very least, as an Executive Agency within the appropriate Commonwealth Department**

External funding – sponsorship and philanthropy

The existing management plan committed the Gardens to seek sponsorship and encourage bequests. We are not aware of any action on this.

During the life of that plan the Friends established a tax-deductible Public Fund to seek donations from members and the public. Since then, an amount approaching \$90,000 has been raised. However, even though the Public Fund is most useful, it has some limitations and in its present form may not attract the amounts needed for major projects. A crucial impediment is that donors to the Fund face some restrictions on being able to influence the way their donations are used.

It seems to us that the governance changes we propose above must be implemented before there is a realistic prospect of the Gardens attracting significant external funding.

External funding should be used as a means of attracting matching grants from government for special and major projects. We doubt that such external funding can realistically be sought or is likely to be provided for routine operational expenditure. The new management plan should report on the number of staff and amount of funds needed to operate the Gardens. Government should be asked to commit to that level of funding, with any specific funding for major projects being in addition to this base.

- **External funding for major projects will be necessary in the future and Governance changes along the above lines are a necessary precursor – such external funding must not be seen as covering operational expenditure, which should be provided by the Government at the level needed to operate the Gardens effectively**

Support for Friends and volunteers

The existing management plan made a number of commitments to support the Friends and volunteers, including the guides. We are grateful that most of these commitments have been honoured. We appreciate the renovations made to the Friends' Lounge a few years ago. We urge that the kinds of support committed to in the existing plan continue in the new plan.

Support for production of the Friends' Newsletter was withdrawn, despite the management plan commitment. We now accept that this is a task we can manage ourselves but note that it has required additional Friends funds and voluntary effort.

The commitment to provide training programs for new guides and to maintain the skills of existing guides weakened during the life of the plan. The last intake and training of new guides was almost entirely done by the guides themselves. We urge that a greater level of support be provided by the Gardens for the next intake and that this be incorporated into the new management plan. We note the investment other institutions such as the Old Parliament House, the Australian National Gallery

and the Australian War Memorial make into the training and support of voluntary guides who are seen as integral to the success of those institutions.

When the proposed Advisory Council is set up we strongly urge that the Friends be invited to nominate one representative to that body, with that representative to be qualified to meet the requirements for membership of the Advisory Council.

The successful introduction of botanic art exhibitions should be recognized and further support of this activity should be included in the management plan.

- **Support for the Friends should continue at least at the levels in the current Management Plan – including re-establishing a major role for management in the training of guides and other volunteers**

Visitor experience

Views are specifically invited on whether any current events are inappropriate.

Before commenting on this, we would like to emphasise the importance of attracting visitors and of building community support for the Gardens. The Gardens are much more than a collection and a research facility. A key measure of their success is the number of visitors and the number of people who gain knowledge of Australian flora from its operations. A high public profile is critical to achieving this success.

In this context, the Friends believe that summer concerts in the Gardens are a highly appropriate activity. The existing management plan commits the Gardens to *working closely with the Friends in the development of ... musical programs*. Successive Annual Reports have mentioned the concerts, although perhaps less positively in recent years. Media reports, however, are consistently positive and highly prominent, perhaps making the concerts the most successful promotion the Gardens has.

The latest Annual Report expresses some concern about the effect of the concerts on lawns. It seems to us that the main reason for having lawns in the Gardens is to create a space for public events such as concerts. We provide activities for children during concerts which reduces the risk of damage to plants. The possibility of damage could be further limited by temporary signs and fencing. It may be sensible to move the Sunday night concert to the Eucalypt Lawn, where the Saturday night concert is already held. The Eucalypt Lawn can cope with large numbers much better than the Café Lawn, wear to the grass is less of a problem and the surrounding gardens are more robust.

Most significant botanic gardens include events like this in their calendar. Those that don't are probably envious of a Garden that attracts 16,000 visitors to a series of concerts which raise a substantial amount in donations. In addition, the concerts, with the attendance of so many people, give the Gardens the opportunity to inform a diverse range of people about major issues that need to be brought to the attention of a wide audience. Some ideas are installation of a large screen with rolling information that could be near the band on concert evenings and outdoor exhibitions placed so as to be accessible to concertgoers.

We feel most strongly that it is vital to hold events that enhance use and awareness of the gardens. This should be a priority in the new management plan and the Friends should normally play an appropriate role in relation to such events. It is accepted that it is desirable to review such events on an ongoing basis and make changes as necessary, in consultation between management and the Friends. Any proposed changes also need to take into account the marketing value of current regular activities, the investment needed to gain profile for any new activities and the stakeholders affected (including the community and community leaders who are not represented by the Friends).

At the present time many visitors are frustrated by poor signage and lack of interpretive information throughout the Gardens. While this is currently being addressed to some extent there is much to do and it should be a high priority for the new management plan to make the ANBG a leader in this area of visitor experience. This includes devoting sufficient resources to plant records to ensure that a very high proportion of plants are labelled and recorded on the database.

Education of young people about Australia's native flora is vital and the ANBG has a key role to play. The resources devoted to education should be increased and additional programs developed. Consideration should be given to making the ANBG part of the PACER program to ensure that many more young people visit the Gardens as part of their National Capital experience.

- **Attracting visitors to the Gardens and giving them a rewarding and educational experience is most important**
- **The summer concerts must continue as a major part of the calendar and with Management support**
- **Signage in the Gardens is poor and must be dramatically improved as soon as possible**
- **The resources devoted to education, especially of young people, must be significantly increased and the Gardens should be seen as one of the key national institutions for young people to visit as part of their curriculum**