

15 National estate

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Background

The Register of the National Estate is a national register of places in Australia which have national estate heritage value—defined by the *Australian Heritage Commission Act 1975* as “places of aesthetic, historic, scientific or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as for the present community”. National Estate places may relate to cultural or natural values and may be of significance to the national, regional or local community.

Many forest areas are listed in the Register of the National Estate. The Commonwealth Government, in making decisions concerning forests, such as the granting of licences to export woodchips, must consider the possible effect of these decisions on the National Estate.

A regional assessment model for identifying the National Estate was developed in 1991-92 by the Australian Heritage Commission and CALM for the Southern Forest Region of South-West Western Australia, (AHC and CALM 1992). The assessment of national estate values in the South-West Forest Region for the Regional Forest Agreement builds on this earlier regional assessment process and is consistent with the statutory requirements of the *Australian Heritage Commission Act*.

The objectives of the national estate study for the South-West Forest Region CRA are to:

- identify indicative national estate values across the region and assess their representation in the nature conservation reserve system and other protective land tenures;
- identify those areas in the region which may be considered for listing in the Register of the National Estate; and
- provide management guidelines on the protection and maintenance of national estate values.

15.2 APPROACH TO THE NATIONAL ESTATE ASSESSMENT

The national estate study involves distinct phases which are outlined below.

The identification phase involves assessing the available information against the national estate criteria to determine areas of indicative national estate value and areas for consideration by the AHC for listing in the Register of the National Estate.

The protection analysis involves an assessment of:

- the regional level of protection of values within the conservation reserve system;
- the importance of reservation for each national estate value, and
- protection through other mechanisms.

Conservation principles are developed by considering the sensitivity to disturbance of each value, as well as current international “best practice” in natural and cultural heritage conservation.

This summary report addresses only the identification and assessment of national estate values within the Comprehensive Regional Assessment. The analysis of protection of national estate values and the development of conservation principles will be addressed in the CRA National Estate Report and in the RFA options report, which will be available separately.

Data review

Much of the data used in the assessment of national estate values derives from extensive data sets assembled by a wide variety of institutions, industry, government organisations and private individuals over many years. Many of the projects undertaken for the CRA biodiversity assessment and the old growth and wilderness assessments also provided data used in the assessment of national estate values. Where possible, one source of data was used to complement or confirm another to ensure that the most robust data sets were compiled.

Seven broad types of information were used in the assessment:

- existing scientific studies and reports;
- site-specific data obtained from field research;
- data collected from mapping, usually aerial photo interpretation;
- information derived from models, using limited ground data;
- studies conducted by consultants;
- existing databases of cultural heritage places;
- community information; and
- information from experts.

Consultation process for national estate assessment

The main objectives of the consultation process are to:

- involve the community in the identification of its heritage;
- inform all sectors of the community (local people and organisations, industry groups, conservation organisations and unions) about the National Estate;
- be open and transparent about process, methods and decisions;
- encourage a better understanding of heritage, the AHC's role and processes; and
- encourage a stronger understanding of management and conservation measures.

Elements of the consultation process are listed below.

Peer review

A peer review of technical procedures was considered necessary to validate methods and to explore specific issues such as the assessment of diversity under national estate criteria and the identification and assessment of significance of flora and fauna taxa (e.g. disjunct and primitive) which related to national estate values.

Key stakeholders

Participating key stakeholders were briefed on the national estate assessment through the RFA Stakeholder Reference Group. Other opportunities for comment will be provided through the public submission period for the RFA options report.

Public meetings

Public meetings were held in a number of towns throughout the region in order to provide information to local communities on the Comprehensive Regional Assessment and Regional Forest Agreement process. These briefings included information on the Register of the National Estate and the national estate assessments being undertaken for the CRA.

Information and media

An RFA newsletter which included information on the national estate assessments being undertaken for the CRA was published and distributed through the South-West Forest Region.

Community heritage workshops

Information on the CRA and RFA process was provided to participants at workshops for the identification of national estate community heritage values held throughout the region.

Aboriginal consultation

An extensive Aboriginal consultation program was initiated in keeping with the commitment of both governments to consult with Aboriginal communities on all aspects of the RFA process. Elements of the program included:

- an initial workshop to which Aboriginal community organisations within the region were invited, as well as organisations such as the Noongar¹ Land Council, the Aboriginal Legal Service and the Aboriginal Affairs Department;
- the establishment of the Western Australian RFA Noongar Action Group (initially known as the Aboriginal Action Group);

¹ The spelling of "Noongar" in this form should also be seen to encompass the following spellings: Nyongar, Nyungar, Noongah, Nyoongah, Nyungah

- a series of workshops throughout the South-West Forest Region which provided an opportunity for Noongar communities to identify issues of concern to them in relation to the protection of Aboriginal heritage and forest management in the South-West Forest Region; and
- participation by Noongar community representatives and organisations such as the Noongar Land Council and the Aboriginal Legal Service in the RFA Stakeholder Reference Group.

15.3 SUMMARY

The national estate assessment included a wide range of values relating to the natural and cultural heritage of the forests of the region. Values identified will be discussed in the CRA national estate report, which will be available separately. The following section is a summary of the assessments undertaken and the broad themes assessed.

Extensive natural values

The natural landscapes identified in the national estate assessment are relatively large areas of land that have not been significantly disturbed by European activity. The largest examples of these in the region, where essentially natural processes dominate the landscape and disturbances have been minimal, are in the southern forest. It is this region which contains the majority of the areas of extensive natural national estate value.

A wilderness quality survey of the region undertaken using the AHC's National Wilderness Inventory (NWI) found no areas of wilderness above the nationally agreed thresholds, as a result of the region's long history of European activity. Some relatively remote and natural areas do survive in the southern forest, which is also where the majority of the remaining old-growth forest areas in the region are to be found.

Flora

Flora values identified in the region included those at the individual species level, as well as values which related to vegetation communities and/or features within the landscape, such as rare or uncommon old-growth forests, flora refuges and areas of flora species richness.

The attributes for the identification of national estate values relating to individual taxa include:

- endemic taxa, primitive and relict taxa, taxa with disjunct distributions and taxa at the limit of their range (criterion A.1); and
- rare and threatened taxa (criterion B.1).

Fauna

Fauna distribution data for the South-West Forest Region were compiled and collated into a centralised fauna data base at the Western Australian Museum. Each fauna taxon was attributed according to characteristics relevant to the assessment of national estate significance, such as:

- endemic taxa, Gondwanic or relict taxa, taxa with disjunct populations and taxa at the limit of their range (criterion A.1); and
- areas providing habitat for rare, uncommon or endangered fauna taxa (criterion B.1).

Other natural values

Places important as refuges from climatic change, as refuges from drought and frequent fire, as research, teaching or type localities and as sites of geological or geomorphological significance were also assessed under the relevant national estate criteria.

Places important as research, teaching or type localities included:

- teaching sites where teaching is occurring or had taken place, where the primary aim of that teaching was to increase understanding about Australian natural history;
- type localities-biological, where the locations of type specimens are internationally recognised and are important for taxonomic reference; and
- type localities-geological, which are localities for fossils and stratigraphic sections.

Cultural values

Cultural values identified through the CRA national estate assessment included social, aesthetic and indigenous values. Preliminary work on the identification of historic values was also carried out. Documentary and community-derived information reveals a wide range of cultural places within the forests of the South-West Forest Region. These places are indicative of the rich and diverse history of human interaction with, and response to, those forests.

Community heritage values

The identification and assessment of national estate social value was based on a community consultation process. A series of 10 consultative workshops was held throughout the region which brought together individuals who represented a broad range of community groups and interests. These individuals worked together as a community to identify places of social value.

Aesthetic values

National estate aesthetic value has been identified and assessed through the analysis of information drawn from a range of sources, namely existing aesthetic value and place studies and databases, published tourist literature, information gathered through interview with forest experts, information derived from the social values project and visual resource management data. The drawing together of these sources allowed for the consideration of both expert and community perceptions of aesthetic value throughout the region.

Indigenous values

The identification and assessment of national estate indigenous value were also based on a community consultation process. Workshops, held in seven community-selected locations, were attended by Noongar community representatives.

In addition to identifying places of Noongar cultural heritage value, these representatives discussed issues of forest and cultural heritage management which were of concern to them. Resolution of these issues is being sought by the RFA Noongar Action Group, which throughout the process of the CRA has provided guidance and advice on the development of indigenous consultative strategies for the RFA.

Historic values

Preliminary work on the identification of historic national estate values included an audit of existing information and databases concerning historic values within the region and the compilation of a thematic history exploring the development of the region from the time of European settlement to today.

15.4 CONCLUSION

The national estate assessment has to date resulted in:

- a regional approach to identification of national estate values, assessing heritage values across the South-West Forest Region;
- a comprehensive information base for a wide range of national estate values on public land within the region; and
- a firm basis on which to incorporate the national estate values into the integration and options development processes for the South-West Forest Region RFA.

An analysis of the protection of national estate values in the region will be undertaken during the integration and options development for the RFA and this information will be included in the CRA national estate report, which will be available separately.