

SOUTH PERON

- a Future Direction

Ron Shepherd
District Manager
Department of Conservation and Land Management
67 Knight Terrace
DENHAM WA 6537

Tel: (099) 481208
Fax: (099) 481024

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DISCUSSION PAPER

FUTURE TENURE AND MANAGEMENT OF SOUTH PERON

Introduction

The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) is keen to resolve, through public consultation, an appropriate land tenure for South Peron. Factors that need to be considered in making this decision include community requirements, economic opportunities, tourism growth, recreation use on the peninsula, and protection and maintenance of South Peron's World Heritage values.

The aim of this paper is to generate discussion and provide a basis for constructive comment on the future of South Peron. The paper outlines the history of land use management of South Peron and describes the values of the area and likely future land use requirements. Three options for future tenure are discussed.

CALM is recommending "Timber Reserve" tenure for South Peron. This will facilitate threatened fauna conservation programs and a sandalwood industry whilst allowing for other land use demands of industry and the local community.

HISTORY

Little is known about the traditional life of the pre-European Aboriginal people of Shark Bay. However, there is an abundance of open shell midden sites (at least 60 recorded on Peron Peninsula) and archaeological evidence indicates occupation of Peron Peninsula from at least 25,000 years ago.

Peron Peninsula was taken up as a sheep station in the late 1880s. At its peak, over 20,000 sheep were run on the property. Reliance on artesian bore water meant that large areas of Peron were never fully utilised for grazing. The wool clip usually received low market value as a result of high sand and vegetable material content.

In 1988, following significant community consultation, the Shark Bay Region Plan was published. The plan recognised the conservation, pastoral, recreation and potential tourism values of Peron and recommended that the northern part of the Peninsula be made a national park, with the southern part zoned for pastoral use.

The State Government purchased Peron Station in October 1990. In January 1993 the Francois Peron National Park was declared. The

southern half of Peron has remained Vacant Crown Land and has been managed on a caretaker basis by CALM. This has primarily involved maintaining the infrastructure and assets until a decision is made on the future land use and tenure for the area.

In December 1991, Shark Bay was listed as a World Heritage property. It is one of the few properties world-wide that meet all four criteria for listing based on natural values. Some of the natural values nominated in the listing can be found on South Peron, for example, birridas and lagoons, such as Dubait Creek, illustrate the geological processes involved in the evolution of the landforms in the Bay. The Bay's offshore islands are refuges for several threatened species and there is widespread recognition that the characteristics of the Peninsula may make it possible to return these species to this mainland site. The coastline of Shark Bay also has inherent beauty and Peron is characterised by calm bays and inlets with wide sweeping beaches of sand or shells, interspersed by rocky platforms and headlands. These provide numerous popular recreational campsites and fishing spots.

In the last two years visitor surveys have clearly shown that tourists are becoming more aware of Shark Bay's World Heritage values and are wanting to discover these in addition to the dolphin experience at Monkey Mia. In response to this demand, tour operators are now including South Peron in their itineraries.

VALUES AND FUTURE LAND USE REQUIREMENTS

Future tenure and management of South Peron must take into consideration environmental and cultural values, economic opportunities and the diverse community requirements of the area. Not all potential land uses can co-exist. However, it should be possible through appropriate management to provide for a diverse array of compatible land uses.

* Nature Conservation

Peron Peninsula is a large area of land (105,000 hectares) connected to the mainland by a narrow neck of land less than three kilometres wide. This geographic attribute has attracted the attention of scientists who believe that the area is an ideal location to establish secure mainland colonies of threatened native animals. Initially, a barrier could be established on the narrow neck of the Taillefer Isthmus to prevent or minimise invasion and reinfestation of feral animals (goats, foxes, rabbits and cats) onto the Peninsula. Eradication and control programs can then be undertaken on the isolated feral populations on the Peninsula. Once this work is

completed, threatened species can be re-introduced to the Peninsula.

The habitat types on Peron are potentially suitable for at least twelve threatened native mammals. It is possible that over the next decade populations of a number of these could be re-established. The reintroductions would attract tourist and scientific attention worldwide. This would create many eco-tourism opportunities for Shark Bay and tours such as night spotlighting would be very popular.

* Aboriginal Site Protection

There are in excess of 30 Aboriginal sites along the coastline of South Peron. They are primarily open shell midden sites, usually associated with stone artefacts and sometimes with other faunal remains such as crab claws and animal bones. Two with particular archaeological interest occur between Denham and Eagle Bluff. Currently, the sites have received minimal disturbance and local CALM staff monitor human activity in the vicinity of the sites. Land use proposals for South Peron must take into consideration the need to protect the coastal midden sites. There is potential for tour operators to develop informative tours of open midden sites.

* Resource Production - Sandalwood

The sandalwood industry generates a gross export income in excess of \$12 million to Western Australia. Approximately 90% of the annual harvest comes from pastoral (Crown) lands in the semi-arid region. Significant impediments to the industry include low rates of natural regeneration, low germination and establishment rates of seedlings and impacts of grazing by sheep, goats and rabbits. Demand for sandalwood from international markets is known to be substantially greater than the current maximum harvesting level in Western Australia.

Peron Peninsula currently has a sandalwood resource that could be harvested on a sustainable yield basis. Local sandalwood exhibits some unique characteristics that enable a good regeneration rate, ie:

- * the ability to coppice (shoot) from root and stem (which does not occur in any other pastoral area of WA);
- * vigorous, healthy growth to large sizes;
- * very heavy seed crops with large seeds; and

- * a higher than average amount of regeneration in the absence of grazing. Germination appears to occur more easily than elsewhere.

Furthermore, the proposed threatened fauna conservation program on Peron is complementary to sandalwood production. The existing feral goat and sheep eradication program and future rabbit control will enhance natural sandalwood regeneration. This, in conjunction with supplementary planting of seeds/seedlings (trials by local CALM staff indicate that this can be successful), could result in a significant increase in the sandalwood resource available for harvesting in the medium to long term. Accordingly, the economic return would be increased.

The sandalwood industry has the potential to tie in with the diverse array of tourism experiences being developed in Shark Bay. Informative tours of sandalwood operations would appeal to visitors. In parallel, there will be a great opportunity for a local sandalwood craft cottage industry to establish a significant niche in the souvenir market. Use for craft wood would provide "value adding" to the local sandalwood timber.

- * Other Resource Production

In addition to sandalwood there is potential for other commercial forest produce from South Peron. Acacias and scrub plants have grained timber suitable for craft wood purposes. Dead timber provides a good supply of firewood for the Denham community and campers. A number of plant groups (for example acacias, buffel grass and wildflowers) produce vast amounts of seed that could be marketable in the growing Western Australian seed industry.

Denham will have ongoing requirements for basic raw materials (eg sand, gravel and rock) for building, landscaping and other purposes. Many of these resources can be found in the South Peron area and it is essential that some of these can be made available for local use.

The extent of mineral deposits and the potential for mining on South Peron is unknown. However, gypsum mining has occurred previously in Shark Bay and other minerals may also occur in the area.

- * Pastoral Value

The Department of Agriculture Rangeland Survey (1980) indicates that the southern half of Peron could run approximately 4,000

sheep. If the country was in good range condition and fully developed (complete network of water points and fences), it would be capable of sustaining 6,000 sheep. In pastoral terms, at this stocking level it is unlikely that South Peron could be operated as a single financial entity.

The grassland (buffel and spinifex) area south of Eagle Bluff provides the most productive pastures on South Peron. Nearly half the calculated stock-carrying capacity of South Peron comes from this area of high grazing value. Grazing on the grassland country could still occur, even if other land uses are given priority for the Peninsula.

* Tourism

The western coastline of South Peron has high scenic value and provides easy access to popular fishing grounds. Camping and other recreational pursuits regularly occur along this stretch of coast. There is the potential to develop managed recreation sites and campgrounds as tourism demands increase. Larger scale resort-style developments may be proposed in the future.

* Townsite Development

The Denham Structure Plan (1991) and recent expansion of the Denham townsite boundary allows for the growth of Denham to a population of 5,000 persons. However, town requirements can not always be predicted. The new airstrip is an example of land requirements that were unforeseen by many two or three years ago. Land use policies for South Peron must be flexible to allow for potential expansion and land requirements for Denham.

TENURE AND MANAGEMENT OPTIONS

Three tenure options have been identified for South Peron. Each addresses the need to cater for future land use requirements and to protect conservation attributes in a different manner. Land use priorities vary according to the tenure option identified.

1. Pastoral Lease

The Shark Bay Region Plan (1988) recommended pastoral use zoning for South Peron. However, the stock level that the area can support is considered generally below what is necessary for a single viable pastoral enterprise. South Peron could therefore only be seen as a secondary or additional source of income.

As a pastoral lease the land is generally controlled by the lessee. Access to tracks and the activities that can occur (camping, access to water points) would be at the discretion of the station manager and may require negotiation and compensation to the lessee.

Extraction of minerals or basic raw materials could occur under mining lease or in a Shire reserve excised from the pastoral lease. This would require negotiation with the lessee. Removal of sandalwood and forest produce could be undertaken under CALM licence and in consultation with the pastoralist.

The level of recreational development would depend on the interests of the lessee. It is possible that day visitors and campers may be actively discouraged and denied access along the lease's management tracks. No attention may be given to recreation management and the campgrounds could be visibly degraded and polluted. On the other hand, the lessee may actively manage visitation (for example as with Tamala and Carrarang Stations) and utilise the opportunity as a second income source.

It is highly unlikely that the threatened mammal conservation program would be considered if South Peron returns to being a functional pastoral lease. Grazing competition, habitat modification and soil degradation resulting from the introduction of hard hoofed domestic stock are considered to be contributing factors to the widescale extinction of native marsupials on the Australian mainland. Thus, it would be considered a risk to carry out a threatened fauna re-introduction program under such circumstances.

Sandalwood regeneration on Peron in the presence of stock grazing would require reassessment to determine long-term resource levels. As has occurred previously, it is probable that the recommendation would be not to allocate a harvest quota.

2. Conservation Reserves

The CALM Act (1984) provides for the reservation of lands for the purpose of a National Park, Conservation Park or Nature Reserve. These categories of land are vested in the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority and are managed by CALM. Management of conservation reserves is primarily directed towards nature conservation, and recreation in the case of parks. Priority is given to land uses that are consistent with these objectives.

The threatened mammal conservation program would be highly consistent with conservation reserve objectives. Protection of Aboriginal sites would occur. Recreational development and management along the coastline would also receive priority under National Park or Conservation Park categories. Tourism potential would be facilitated, including opportunities with private enterprise.

Resource utilisation would generally be inconsistent with conservation reserve tenure. Sandalwood and timber production and commercial wildflower and seed collection would not be permitted. Basic raw material or mineral extraction could occur in mining leases or Shire reserves excised from the conservation reserve. However, these actions would require the concurrence of Parliament if the reserve is Class A.

Excisions from conservation reserves for townsite expansion or other community purposes would require agreement by Parliament if the reserve is a National Park or Conservation Park or if the reserve is Class A.

3. Timber Reserve

Timber Reserves can also be established under the CALM Act 1984. Timber Reserves are vested in the Lands and Forest Commission and managed by CALM.

A Timber Reserve is one of the most flexible categories of land managed by CALM. Its purpose, or combination of purposes, can include conservation, recreation, sustainable timber production and other purposes included in regulations. A Timber Reserve is not subject to the land use constraints which apply under the CALM Act to conservation reserves. Most activities can occur, except for those that are opposed to the purposes of the reserve. Examples of land use activities likely to be allowed on a Timber Reserve for South Peron are:

- * leases and licences could be issued for a range of activities, including rock/gravel and sand extraction, sandalwood harvesting, commercial wildflower and seed collecting and access to artesian bore water;
- * current access arrangements could remain, with virtually all tracks remaining open;
- * leases for pastoral grazing could be issued in areas where timber is unlikely to be harvested. Therefore, the most suitable pastoral land on Peron - the highly

productive grassland area south of Eagle Bluff - could be leased for stock grazing. (It is unlikely that grazing on this relatively small area of primarily introduced grasses would be inconsistent with the threatened mammal conservation program.);

- * firewood collection could be permitted in designated areas; and
- * pets (dogs and horses) are allowed to be taken into Timber Reserves.

Tourism and recreational development along the coastline would also be compatible with the objectives of a Timber Reserve. The suitability and capacity of sites to support various recreational pursuits can be assessed and managed accordingly.

Timber Reserves can be cancelled or amended easily. This would enable excisions for mining leases or Denham community land use requirement purposes. All that is required is an order made by the Governor and published in the Government Gazette, cancelling all or part of the timber reserve. No approval by Parliament is required.

CONCLUSION

The Shark Bay Region Plan (1988) recommended that the future land use for the southern half of Peron be pastoral use. The current economic contribution and community focus on tourism growth in Shark Bay indicates that other uses more consistent with this direction require serious consideration. In recent years, World Heritage listing has given attention to environmental attributes of the area and complementary nature conservation programs that could be implemented. Future management of the area must also conform with international obligations to protect World Heritage values.

This discussion paper has identified a broad range of future land requirements for South Peron. Three tenure options and how they impact on potential land uses have been addressed.

The commercial viability and the economic return to the local community of the pastoral lease option is questioned. In addition, as a pastoral lease it is unlikely that the sandalwood industry and threatened species conservation programs would proceed, and there is uncertainty about recreation management and development.

The conservation reserve option fully meets nature conservation objectives. However, this option is too restrictive on natural

resource production opportunities and potential land requirements of a growing community.

The Timber Reserve option would provide for the perceived land use requirements for South Peron. Management of the Timber Reserve would give priority to nature conservation, sandalwood production and tourism programs. These complementary programs should provide a catalyst for economic growth in the local community. In addition, the Timber Reserve proposal will cater for other land use requirements of industry and the town.

It is recommended to the people of Shark Bay that they endorse the Timber Reserve proposal for South Peron. There is no other land tenure that caters for the management vision for Peron and meets the local community requirements.