



NEW SOUTH WALES AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Managing Natural and Cultural Heritage in Parks and Reserves:
National Parks and Wildlife Service



THE AUDIT OFFICE
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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Performance audits are reported separately, with all other audits included in one of the regular volumes of the Auditor-General's Reports to Parliament - Financial Audits.



AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Managing Natural and Cultural Heritage in Parks and Reserves

National Parks and Wildlife Service



The Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

The Legislative Council
Parliament House
SYDNEY NSW 2000

In accordance with section 38E of the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983*,
I present a report titled **Managing Natural and Cultural Heritage in
Parks and Reserves: National Parks and Wildlife Service.**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R J Sendt".

R J Sendt
Auditor-General

June 2004

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Contents

Foreword

Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	9
1.1 The Service and its responsibilities	10
1.2 Size and structure	10
1.3 Complexities in managing natural and cultural heritage	11
1.4 The Audit	13
2. Evaluating success	15
2.1 Measuring success	16
2.2 Defining success	17
2.3 <i>'State of the Parks'</i>	19
2.4 Costing its outputs	19
2.5 <i>Plan of Management</i> 'self-audits'	21
2.6 Stakeholders	22
3. Research	23
3.1 Current research	24
3.2 Research framework	26
3.3 Information management model	27
3.4 Data coverage and quality	28
4. Planning	29
4.1 Focus on activities, processes and services	30
4.2 Risk management	30
4.3 Strategic and operational planning	32
4.4 <i>Plans of Management</i>	32
4.5 A framework to guide <i>Plans of Management</i>	36
4.6 Threatened species recovery planning	37
5. Resources	39
5.1 Budget per hectare	40
5.2 Allocating resources	41
5.3 Deferred maintenance backlog	43
5.4 Funding new land	45
6. Reporting	47
6.1 Public reporting	48
6.2 Internal reporting	49
6.3 Excessive reporting requirements	50
Appendices	53
Appendix 1 Terms Used in this Report	54
Appendix 2 About the Audit	55
Performance Audits by the Audit Office of New South Wales	57

Foreword

Each generation has an obligation to protect the environment for the benefit of future generations.

Establishing reserves (including National Parks) is a key action that governments take towards meeting that obligation. Protected reserves now cover about 7.4 per cent of New South Wales, with around 40 per cent of that area declared in the last five years.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service manages this system of reserves. This report examines how well the Service meets its management responsibilities.

Managing reserves is a complex task. The Service has to conserve and protect reserves, but another part of its role is to make them available for our enjoyment. Past and present human activity, both within and outside reserves, impacts upon their natural and cultural heritage.

Despite natural and cultural heritage management being inherently complex, it is critical to have sound information on the state of that heritage. This will help the Service know what needs to be done, where to direct its efforts, and how effective its conservation and protection measures have been. Such information also helps government and the community judge the Service's performance and assess the level of resources it should be given.

This report should be relevant to anyone with an interest in the management of our natural and cultural heritage. Given the importance of the environment, this should be all of us.

R J Sendt
Auditor General

June 2004

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The National Parks and Wildlife Service has a core responsibility to conserve, protect and manage the cultural and natural heritage in reserved areas of New South Wales. The audit examines how well the Service meets that responsibility.

Audit Opinion

Evaluating reserve management is inherently complex. Current world-wide experience is evolving and agencies responsible for natural and cultural heritage face similar difficulties.

Managing reserves requires that judgements be made about the condition of natural and cultural heritage and decisions taken as to what is, at least, an acceptable standard. Reliable information is fundamental to these tasks and for monitoring success, continuous improvement and accountability.

In our opinion the Service has yet to:

- clarify what constitutes success in reserve management
- develop an adequate information base to measure its success.

Consequently the Service cannot reliably determine how well it conserves and protects our natural and cultural heritage. This is a common situation for like agencies.

The above impact on the Service's planning, research, resourcing and reporting on its stewardship of our heritage. The Service is developing:

- a 'directions paper' which is expected to include specific objectives and priorities
- an ambitious approach to measure results, *State of the Parks*, that promises a great deal and is being guided by a leading expert.

In our opinion, the Service has a significant challenge to realise the potential of these initiatives. A momentum for change is evident and the Service's personnel are professional and enthusiastic. To date, however, the Service has found it difficult to effectively coordinate and implement key Service-wide initiatives and commit sufficient resources to measuring its success.

Recommendation

To support continuous improvement and accountability, we recommend the Service:

- establish specific objectives and priorities for reserve management
- implement a comprehensive system to measure and evaluate its results.

We note the Service has major initiatives in train to this end and recommend these be given high priority.

Background

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Service is responsible for some 639 reserves, including National Parks, Nature Reserves and State Conservation Areas. These cover 7.4 per cent of NSW and total 5.9 million hectares, compared to 3.9 million hectares in 1991-92. About 40 per cent of the Service's reserves have been declared in the last five years.

The complexity of the task is evidenced by the following:

- the Service has to balance conservation with enjoyment
- many factors beyond the control of the Service, discrete or cumulative, can have an impact on natural and cultural heritage and management programs
- the impact of management actions can be difficult to isolate and improvement may take many years to become evident
- the Service needs to deal with an elaborate web of legal, policy and stakeholder accountabilities
- the impact of bushfires can significantly disrupt planned allocation of resources and implementation of programs.

The on-reserve functions of the Service are now the responsibility of the Parks and Wildlife Division of the new Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC).

Key Findings

Chapter 2: Evaluating success

An organisation needs to measure its performance so it can take action to maintain and improve good results or fix problems that cause unwanted results.

The Service does not yet have an effective way to measure success. This does not mean that the Service is not efficient or effective, however it cannot reliably:

- determine which reserves, and their contents, are at an acceptable standard and which are not
- assess how well it conserves our natural and cultural heritage
- account for the time spent by staff on its core role of conservation and relate these costs to its accomplishments.

The Service is developing performance indicators, systems and processes for evaluating conservation outcomes and management effectiveness. This '*State of the Parks*' initiative is an important shift and will affect how the Service plans, evaluates, allocates resources and reports on progress.

The Service has a positive relationship with stakeholders, and has won international acclaim for aboriginal joint management of a national park.

Chapter 3: Research

Research is essential to conserve and protect and generally manage natural and cultural heritage. Some research by the Service is highly regarded. But this is not uniform, with variation in the quality and coverage of data across the Service. This is more evident at the local level where research is not always:

- targeted to Service priorities and actions
- designed to promote broad application of findings
- effectively collated, communicated and used
- sufficient.

The Service necessarily prioritises the management of threats, and must respond to visitor issues and unplanned events such as fires in reserves. The Service has found it difficult to commit sufficient resources to research, which has suffered as a result.

We suggest DEC develop a department-wide framework to provide a greater nexus between corporate and local level research and contribute to:

- more consistent standards of research
- better targeting of effort
- policy development
- managing information better.

The Service has developed, but is yet to implement, key aspects of a *Natural Heritage Research: Plan, Policy and Procedures*. The document goes part way to a framework.

The Service advises that the issue of an appropriate research framework will be considered in the context of a review of scientific activities recently commenced in DEC.

Chapter 4: Planning

Good planning helps agencies clarify what they intend to achieve, by when, and how they will measure progress.

The Service's existing planning has a number of strengths, but some shortcomings. Overall, planning by the Service does not:

- apply a structured risk management approach to natural and cultural heritage
- focus sufficiently on impacts, outcomes and targets.

The law requires each reserve to have a *Plan of Management*. Less than one third of reserves have such a plan. Some areas have been without a plan for many years, and many that now have them were without a plan for a long time.

Where a *Plan of Management* does not exist, other planning instruments (such as the Pre Plan of Management Policy, Fire Management Strategies, Regional Pest plans and *Statements of Interim Management Intent*) guide management of reserves. These, however, do not involve the rigorous level of community consultation and Ministerial approval that *Plans of Management* require.

Their legal status suggests that *Plans of Management* would drive the management of reserves. This is not the case. While plans have improved over time and have involved extensive community engagement in their development, they:

- do not clarify standards of park management or include associated targets, performance indicators and monitoring programs
- do not integrate well with the Service's strategic planning or link strongly with corporate priority setting and resource allocation
- are not, on occasion, designed around what needs to be done but rather what can be done within the constraints of existing financial resources.

**Chapter 5:
Resources**

The Service's annual budget per hectare has roughly doubled in real terms since 1991-92. It is not possible to determine whether this is sufficient because the Service cannot reliably demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness.

Branches and several Regions and Areas use quite sophisticated approaches to allocate financial resources to priority areas but the allocation is based on limited information.

The Service estimates it has a substantial and growing deferred maintenance liability. It is currently implementing an asset management system which should enable it to quantify this liability.

The Service has a good approach for identifying new land acquisitions, but no agreement with Treasury for ongoing funding of these extra responsibilities despite six years of negotiation.

Chapter 6: Reporting

The Service's reporting provides:

- important information on the Service's key activities and outputs
- limited assurance that reserve values are maintained, goals are met, and strategic objectives advanced.

It does not clarify:

- what the Service achieved compared to what it planned to achieve
- the Service's efficiency or effectiveness.

The shortcomings in planning, monitoring and costing mentioned above hamper good performance reporting.

The *State of the Parks* initiative has the potential to improve the Service's reporting on reserve management.

Acknowledgements

The Audit Office acknowledges the cooperative approach of the Service, and its openness to constructive dialogue.

We would like to thank the many people who gave generously of their time and expertise to assist us.

Response from the Department of Environment and Conservation

Thank you for your letter of 11 May 2004 providing the final draft report of the performance audit - National Parks and Wildlife Service Managing Natural and Cultural Heritage in Parks and Reserves for our comment.

The Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) was formed on 24 September 2003 and now incorporates the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The audit provides important information and analysis of key issues that we will address as we move forward in our establishment plan. The audit findings will help to underpin the strategic direction of DEC in achieving excellence in protected area management. The report has recognised a number of important elements of park management in that it:

- appreciates the complexity of the task faced by the agency and that comparative agencies around the world face similar challenges at this time*
- acknowledges that the Service has many good practices in place*
- identifies that the creation of DEC presents an opportunity to improve reserve management*
- recognises that a number of initiatives under way have the potential to address the report's findings. These initiatives include:*
 - a) State of the Parks adaptive management model and report*
 - b) Future Directions paper being prepared by the agency*
 - c) Review of Science across DEC*
 - d) Asset Maintenance System*
 - e) Land Information System*

We support the reports emphasis on finalising negotiations with Treasury on a funding agreement for the ongoing management of new reserves as soon as practicable.

I appreciate the constructive and professional manner in which officers of the Service and the Audit Office cooperated on this audit. I support the presentation of the audit report to Parliament.

(signed)

LISA CORBYN
Director General

Dated: 31 May 2004

1. Introduction

1.1 The Service and its responsibilities

The *National Parks and Wildlife Act* established the National Parks and Wildlife Service with the following key objects:

- to conserve, protect and manage the State's natural and cultural heritage
- to provide opportunities for the public to enjoy, appreciate and support this heritage within the boundaries of areas protected for this purpose (reserves).

There are ten main categories of reserves. The categories recognise that some reserves can cope fairly easily with different types of human activities while others are more fragile and need a higher level of protection.

At the start of this audit, the Service was a separate Government agency. On 24 September 2003, the Government created a new Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). The on-reserve functions of the Service are now the responsibility of the Parks and Wildlife Division of DEC.

The Service is responsible for the growth and management of NSW reserves and day-to-day wildlife management within and outside its reserves. It:

- works to conserve protected native animals and plants and objects and places of Aboriginal and historic heritage within the reserve system
- promotes community awareness, understanding and appreciation of natural and cultural heritage.

1.2 Size and structure

The Service manages 7.4 per cent of NSW land

The Service manages 639 reserves, covering 7.4 per cent of New South Wales. Its budget in 2003-04 was more than \$300 million, and it had over 1900 full time staff.

The Service is highly decentralised. It is made up of a corporate branch and four field Branches. Most field Branches contain five Regions. All Regions but one have multiple Areas. Eighty per cent of its staff are based in Branches, Regions, Areas and reserves throughout NSW.

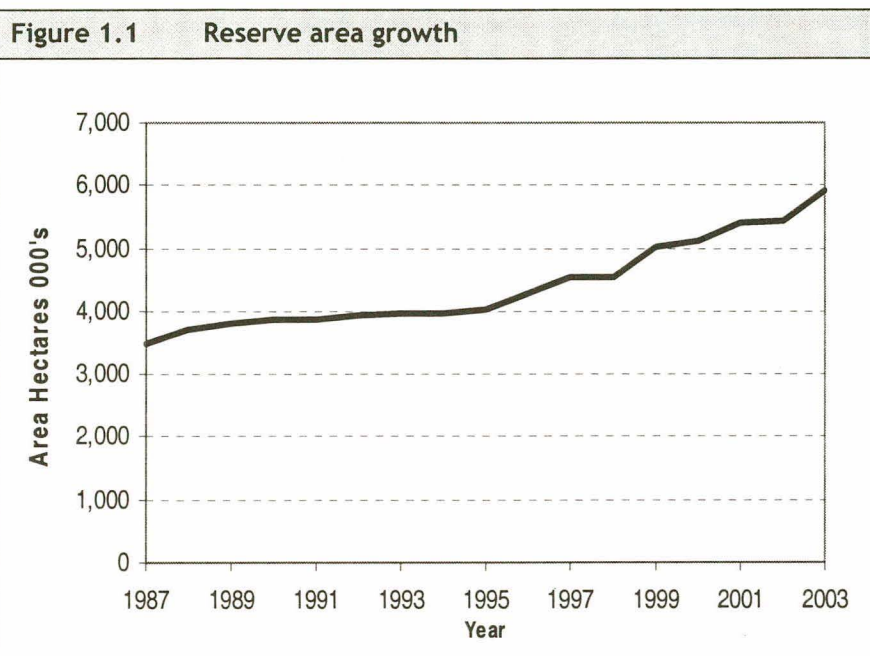
The oldest national park in NSW is Royal National Park, administered from Audley on Sydney's southern outskirts. It was created in 1879, seven years after the creation of Yellowstone National Park in the USA, the world's first national park.

Substantial growth in estate

The Service's estate has grown significantly in recent years, as shown in Figure 1.1, driven by a Government policy commitment to a Comprehensive Adequate and Representative (CAR) Reserve System.

Much of this growth has been through transfer of government owned lands to the Service arising from Regional Forest Agreements (Eden, Upper Northern, Lower Northern, Southern).

Attention is shifting to the western part of the state, which is under-represented compared to land closer to the coast. Acquisition of land in the west frequently involves purchase of private properties formerly used for cultivation or grazing, bringing a range of new and different management challenges.



Source: Service data

1.3 Complexities in managing natural and cultural heritage

Managing natural and cultural heritage is inherently complex and difficult.

The impact of management actions can:

- be hard to isolate from external factors
- take many years to become evident.

Case study: Bushfires

Under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and the *Rural Fires Act 1997*, the Service has responsibilities to protect human life, property, and natural and cultural heritage values from bushfires on its reserves. This responsibility can have significant impact on the Service's other planned operations. To illustrate:

- in 2002-03, 432 wildfires burnt over 1,000,000 hectares, or 16 per cent, of the Service's land, and its staff helped turn another 95 fires away from reserves
- in 2003-04, 1350 or two thirds of Service staff were involved in fire suppression across the reserve system
- training of personnel and maintenance of fire fighting assets are significant costs for the Service
- the costs of declared fire operations were approximately \$50 million in 2002-03, and while this is recouped from insurance, it demonstrates the extent of disruption to planned work programs
- insurance premiums increased from \$2.5 million in 1990-91 to \$23.5 million in 2002-03.

There is a natural tension between the key objects of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*, being to:

- *conserve, protect and manage* the State's natural and cultural heritage and
- *provide opportunities for the public to enjoy, appreciate and support* this heritage within reserves.

The Service is required to manage these tensions.

Hypothetical - Reserve management tensions

The following hypothetical examples illustrate:

- closure of a former logging road to recreational vehicles will reduce the opportunity for such enthusiasts to enjoy and appreciate the natural landscape but may prevent weed incursion and soil erosion
- removal of horses from sensitive alpine environments may reduce hoof damage to soil and plants (Australia has no native hooved animals) but allowing horses to roam in Alpine areas may be important to European cultural heritage (Man from Snowy River).

The Service also has to manage within an elaborate web of legal, policy and stakeholder accountabilities, for example:

- international obligations such as protection of World Heritage and RAMSAR wetlands
- intra-government strategy and policy development and implementation, for issues such as bushfires, bio-diversity and catchment management
- inter-government agreements, for example the Regional Forest Agreements with the Commonwealth

- stakeholder representative bodies including the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council and Regional Advisory Committees
- a statutory Audit and Compliance Committee, with a broad brief to examine compliance with obligations imposed under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act*.

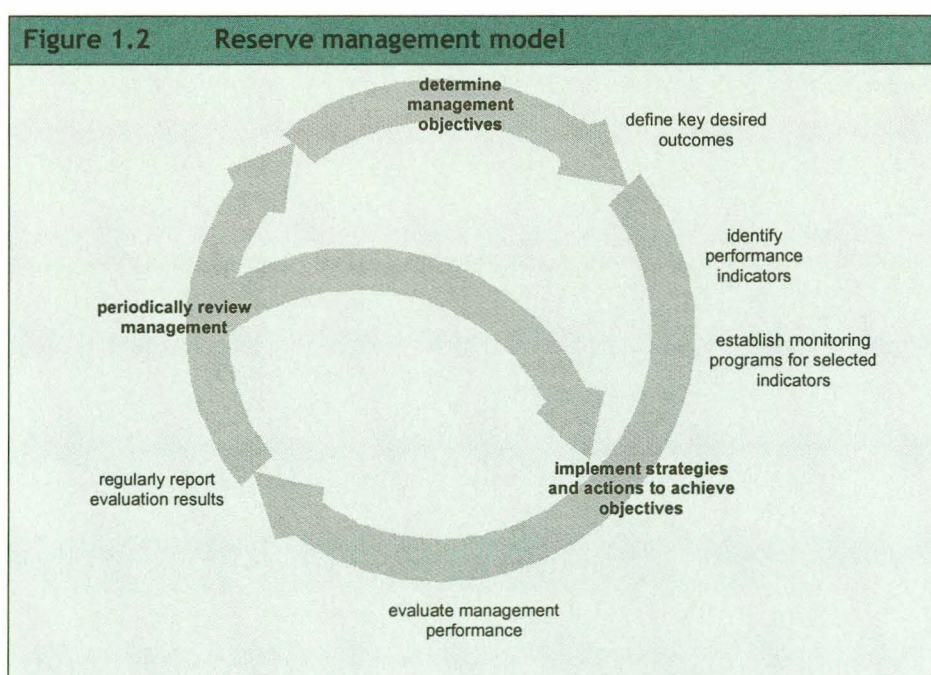
1.4 The Audit

We examined how well the Service manages the natural and cultural heritage in its reserves. In particular we examined how results:

- feed back to improve on-going performance
- provide the basis for transparent reporting and accountability.

For this purpose we used a generic model for the management of reserves described below. We found areas across the agency where improvement in the Service's current arrangements is required, when compared to the model.

We also found that the Service needs to improve its coordination of effort to implement agreed policies and frameworks consistently and cohesively. These issues are discussed in the following chapters.



Source: Glenys Jones, A dummy's guide to evaluating management of protected areas - lessons from the Tasmanian World Heritage Area, Paper to the IUCN Vth World Parks Congress, Durban, South Africa, September 2003.

Key steps in the management model are:

- developing management objectives
- articulating these objectives in terms of 'key desired outcomes', to clarify what on-ground results would be expected if the objectives were fully realised
- identifying a range of performance indicators that could be measured to reveal how well management is working
- developing management strategies and actions to achieve the key desired outcomes
- establishing monitoring programs for the highest priority performance indicators
- collating the results of monitoring programs and reporting them to managers and stakeholders.

Such a system is consistent with best practice in environmental management and would:

- provide reliable information for staff and stakeholders on the condition of reserves, and the results of management actions
- promote transparency in decision making and public involvement in reserve management.

2. Evaluating success

Evaluating success
at a glance

The conservation of flora, fauna and cultural heritage is a complex, difficult and costly responsibility.

Chapter 2 considers whether the Service is able to reliably judge its progress in conserving our natural and cultural heritage.

We believe, overall, the Service cannot but is taking steps to improve the way it measures its effectiveness.

This is typical of reserve management agencies. In the words of one leading expert:

... the current state of knowledge and experience in the use of performance indicators for protected areas is as yet rudimentary and in a state of rapid evolution.¹

2.1 Measuring success

The Service has yet to:

- clarify what constitutes success in reserve management
- develop an adequate information base to measure its success.

The Service does
not reliably know if
it is efficient and
effective

Consequently, in our opinion the Service is not in a position to reliably determine how well it conserves the natural and cultural heritage. This does not mean that the Service is not efficient or effective. It does mean, however, that the Service does not reliably know the extent of its efficiency and effectiveness.

The Service is mindful of efficiency and effectiveness, but like other reserve management agencies it currently relies on broad objectives and a subjective approach² to make key decisions on such matters as:

- what does the money need to be spent on? (and)
- what has been achieved from the expenditure?

As discussed below, the Service is working to more reliably determine and demonstrate its efficiency and effectiveness.

¹ Glenys Jones, *Outcomes-based evaluation of management of protected areas - a methodology for incorporating evaluation into management plans*, May 2000.

² Informed by available, limited empirical evidence, occasional sample surveys and professional judgement.

Tasmanian World Heritage Areas

The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service integrates performance monitoring, evaluation and reporting into its overall management cycle.

Plans of Management are the vehicle used to give effect to this initiative.

The process generates informed feedback on past management approaches to progressively improve effectiveness. The main inputs to the evaluation of management are:

- scientific data and other measured evidence about performance indicators
- information and professional opinions of experts
- the views of the general public and on-site visitors
- assessments on management performance by internal and external stakeholders closely associated with management of the Areas.

Data and other inputs to the evaluation are gathered via targeted questionnaires. The results of this initiative will be published in regular 'State of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Reports'.

2.2 Defining success

Directions and priorities are yet to be clarified

The Service is yet to effectively translate the objects in the Act to overarching, specific, measurable management objectives.

The Service is in the process of developing a *Directions Paper*, which will establish its future directions and identify priorities for reserves³. This is an important initiative. The *Directions Paper* should provide a consistent and documented aim that we believe the current planning, management, evaluation and reporting processes within the Service do not have.

The need for clearer statements of direction and priorities has been evident for some time. For example a 1998 review for the Service identified:⁴

... the absence of a policy statement about where the Service sits on the question of biodiversity maintenance versus recreational and other uses of reserved lands and the relationship it proposes between biodiversity maintenance or conservation and the protection of cultural values. This is a strategic vacuum.

While the Service has made some progress since then,⁵ we believe it needs to clarify what constitutes success in reserve management to move from intuitive to informed management.

³ Establishment Plan of the Department of Environment and Conservation, November 2003.

⁴ Australia Street Company for National Parks and Wildlife Service, *Plans of Management Review*, July 1998, p 9.

⁵ Primarily through the Visions process (see glossary) and 'State of the Parks' (see later in this chapter).

Performance standards need to be further developed

To ensure current and future success it is important to:

- measure certain aspects of an organisation's performance against a standard
- know what aspects of performance are critical for success, and the standards being pursued.

Such an approach is likely to provide greater assurance that resources are allocated to priorities.

Hypothetical - Implications of Minimum Performance Standards

A reserve manager who knows that an attribute:

- is improving in Reserve A but declining in Reserve B would logically give priority for attention and resources to Reserve B
- is improving in Reserve A but is well below the minimum performance standard, and is declining in Reserve B but is well above the standard, would logically give priority to Reserve A.

Case study: Development of Branch Standards

One Branch has developed standards for:

- infrastructure such as toilets, displays, picnic shelters, guide fences, platforms, board-walks, bollards and walking track surface
- roads and trails, and a standardised road/trail database
- bridges
- sewerage management
- waste and recycling.



GOOD PRACTICE

These are being progressively implemented across the Branch. They promote a consistent approach to design, construction and management and link to budgeting and planning.

Some Regions use performance standards for infrastructure, health and safety, but the Service is yet to develop standards for other aspects of natural and cultural heritage management.

The 2003 World Parks Congress (organised by the World Conservation Union - IUCN) called for global standards in managing reserves. The Service is seeking to align itself with the reserve categories of the Union and sees this as an important first step on the path to a much broader approach to standard setting.

We recognise that developing standards is difficult. But we believe that the Service's work in developing performance indicators (2.3 *State of the Parks*) and management regimes (developed in the course of negotiations with NSW Treasury over funding of new reserves, discussed in 5.4 Funding new land) provides a foundation for standard setting.

The Natural Resources Commission is to establish scientifically based environmental standards for issues such as water quality, salinity, soil erosion and biodiversity. The Service may need to consider these standards in developing its standards.

2.3 'State of the Parks'

The Service is developing indicators of performance

The Service is developing performance indicators to measure how effectively it conserves and protects its reserves. Field staff, internationally renowned experts and key stakeholders are assisting in this significant and ambitious initiative.

The initiative is an important shift in the type of information being collected and will affect the manner in which the Service plans, monitors, evaluates, allocates resources and reports. Progress is to be reported in a document titled '*State of the Parks*', published every three years, and in the Service's annual report. The first '*State of the Parks*' report to include performance indicators will be published in late 2004. Clearly, the quantity and quality of information in '*State of the Parks*' will evolve over time.



'*State of the Parks*' will have two annual components.

- a 'rapid assessment' of all its reserves. A leading expert is helping the Service develop the assessment tool, based on a World Conservation Union endorsed approach. The local manager will complete this questionnaire and there will be controls to promote accurate and valid assessment including training of staff by this expert, peer challenge, supervisor review and stakeholder input
- a detailed quantitative data collection exercise in a sample of reserves. Field staff, key stakeholders and internationally renowned experts helped develop the indicators. A data set will be progressively built over time. Trial data collections have been conducted, and the results are being used to refine the indicators and improve data systems.

The information will be analysed to assess the condition of reserves and the impact of management actions, inform decision making at all levels in the Service and demonstrate performance accountability.

2.4 Costing its outputs

Service assigns costs to functional areas, not to outputs

The Service has traditionally assigned costs to its functional areas such as a Branch, Region, or Area but does not have reliable information on the cost of what it has accomplished (its outputs).

This is because the Service cannot account for the time spent by its staff on its core responsibility of managing natural and cultural heritage.

The Service needs to be able to reliably assign costs to what it does and achieves:

- to assess economy, efficiency and cost effectiveness
- for effective control and decision-making.

This would help answer questions such as:

- are benefits of outputs greater than their costs?
- are outputs produced efficiently?
- what outputs, if any, should be discontinued, given resource limitations?
- how can the agency meet expected demands in the future?

While the Service is not able to reliably cost its outputs, it estimates spending on output 'classes' including:

- pests
- weeds
- threatened species
- visitors
- fire.

In terms of costing its outputs, the Service is in transition from stage 1 to stage 2 as described in Figure 2.2 opposite. In the longer term, NSW Treasury expects all agencies of a significant size achieve stages 3 or 4. Most agencies are yet to attain stage 3.

The new Department of Environment and Conservation intends to implement financial and human resources systems as a matter of priority, which may lead to an output costing system.

Figure 2.2 Stages of Costing Outputs	
Stage	Characteristics
Stage 1 Non-existent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ agency does not cost its outputs
Stage 2 Compliance focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the provision of information on output costs is largely driven by external reporting requirements ▪ management largely monitors input costs ▪ the use of output costing information is largely restricted to the finance department ▪ output costing information will generally be at a high level, ie output group
Stage 3 Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ output costing is driven by the finance department but management uses the information ▪ internal reporting includes output costing information and is used to support decision making ▪ the agency can identify the costs of individual outputs as well as output groups
Stage 4 Management focussed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ output costing is seen as the preserve of the whole organisation ▪ information from the costing system is used in all key business decisions ▪ the costing system focuses not only on the costs of outputs, but also on the costs of processes that are undertaken to produce those outputs

Source: NSW Treasury

2.5 Plan of Management 'self-audits'

The Service conducts 'self-audits' of plans that seek to:

- establish the extent to which actions in *Plans of Management* have been implemented
- strengthen the principle of accountability for specific actions in plans.



This is a recent initiative, which we believe would be enhanced by mechanisms to ensure:

- self-audits are free from bias and of consistently high quality (similar to the approach adopted by the Service for '*State of the Parks*')
 - management responds to findings of self-audits including Service-wide issues and trends.

We also see merit in:

- self-audits examining whether actions in plans led to desired outcomes
- increasing the number of self-audits undertaken each year (currently nineteen of its more than 600 reserves)
- extending self-audits to other plans such as threatened species plans, recovery plans, and fire management plans.

2.6 Stakeholders

We examined the Service's processes and procedures for stakeholder liaison, and spoke with a wide range of stakeholders about their relationship with the Service. We concluded that the Service's:

- processes and procedures for stakeholder liaison are effective overall
- engagement with stakeholders is good and improving, although this varies between Regions.



While stakeholders do not always agree with the Service's decisions, they comment that the Service's processes and commitment to consultation are good.

Case study: Arakwal National Park - joint management

Arakwal National Park is the first in Australia to be jointly managed under an Indigenous Land Use Agreement.

The Arakwal people of Cape Byron and the Service received the 'Packard Award for Distinguished Achievements in Wildlife Conservation' during the World Parks Congress in 2003 for this initiative.

It is an example of active reconciliation and community/government partnership, and is a model for resolving other native title claims.



3. Research

Research at a glance

Chapter 3 examines the Service's research to monitor the condition of reserves and the impact of management actions.

We believe greater emphasis needs to be given to research at the field level and that a department-wide research management framework is needed, with field ownership of directions and priorities.

3.1 Current research

Research is critical to good reserve management

Research is central to the Service's role as protector of the State's reserve system. Quality research is fundamental to good policy and effective management. The Service describes research in the following terms:

The overall objective of research within the Service is the acquisition of good knowledge to underpin and inform good conservation practice and policy.

The successful conservation of the natural heritage of NSW depends on a sound knowledge and understanding of species, populations, ecological communities, landforms and ecosystem processes, and their responses to externalities such as threatening processes, land use changes, and visitor use.

Research, as defined in the Service's *Natural Heritage Research: Plan, Policy and Procedures*,⁶ is all scientific activities carried out by the Service and its contractors, which includes:

- any process of gathering new data
- critically interpreting or analysing existing data to inform policy development, research development or field management
- developing new scientific theories, models and techniques
- surveys of plants, animals, vegetation, geomorphology or habitat
- systematically monitoring the impact of particular field management techniques
- the conduct of scientific studies suitable for journals.



GOOD PRACTICE

Some of the research undertaken by the Service is highly regarded. The Service also plays an important role in undertaking research to support cross-government initiatives such as the NSW Biodiversity Strategy and bushfire management.

⁶ The definition of research is currently being reconsidered as part of the DEC Review of Scientific Activities. The terms of reference for this review distinguish between research to generate new knowledge and monitoring and surveying activities.



Case study: Fox TAP

The Threat Abatement Plan for predation by the Red Fox (Fox TAP):

- establishes control and conservation priorities
- incorporates best practice guidelines
- identifies research to refine practices
- establishes monitoring programs to provide direct and objective performance measures.

Plan Implementation has resulted in significant achievements including a 600 per cent increase in the population of the yellow-footed rock wallaby in the Mutawintji National Park and Nature Reserve.



Case study: Visitor Information Systems

In 2002-03, one Branch:

- developed an electronic recording system to obtain visitor information at 29 priority sites and address its lack of empirical data on visitors
- commenced collecting and reporting visitor survey data in a systematic way.

These have been complemented by independent studies on visitor profiles and the economic impact of visitors on reserves.

The information derived from these initiatives has been used for priority setting and to improve management decisions.

The computer system which records quantitative visitation data and qualitative visitor survey data has now been adopted across the Service.

Such high standards are not uniform across the Service. Our observations and discussions with key staff and experts indicate that field-based research is not always:

- targeted to the most relevant and important issues for the Service, particularly the impact of management actions
- designed so that it is repeatable, robust and promotes broad application of findings⁷
- used to inform policy development and conservation management
- collated to allow future reference or research
- well disseminated and communicated
- used for management functions such as strategic planning and resource allocation.

⁷ This refers to monitoring and not research that requires scientific licensing and/or approval by the Animal Care and Ethics Committee.

The Service has found it difficult to resource research

Staff and experts identified a lack of emphasis on research at the local level, and attributed this to a lack of resources. As research is not conclusive, but usually establishes the need for further action, it has been accorded less emphasis than other activities with more immediate and tangible results. The Service acknowledges this and advises that it:

- gives higher priority to managing issues, threats and impacts than measurement, which it considers appropriate
- has found it difficult to make an ongoing commitment to measuring natural and cultural heritage.

3.2 Research framework

A Service-wide framework is needed

We consider that research needs to be managed from a department-wide perspective, but with field ownership of directions and priorities. There should be a research framework to provide:

- a clear understanding of research and its purpose
- monitoring priorities
- standardised, best practice data collection and analysis procedures, tools and systems
- mechanisms to ensure research is relevant and robust
- a long term commitment to monitoring (including funding)
- central coordination, facilitation and integration which provides a clear nexus between research undertaken at all levels in the Service.

Department-wide research management would also better position the Service to promote its priorities to outside researchers (such as students and Universities). It may also lead to more equitable distribution of such research activity. Some reserves are advantaged by their proximity to urban areas and research institutions. Coordination of research priorities and programs with '*State of the Parks*' performance measures and monitoring is more likely with a department-wide research framework.

DEC review to consider research framework

The Service advises that the issue of an appropriate research framework will be considered in the context of a Review of Scientific Activities recently commenced by DEC, which will lead to a Science Investment Plan. This plan is intended to identify research priorities, link to policy and operational priorities, and allocate resources accordingly.

DEC brings together scientific and policy expertise from a range of conservation agencies including the Service. While the Department's structure and division of responsibilities is still being finalised, it has recognised the need to improve information. Its *Establishment Plan* (December 2003) identifies key activities and actions during its first twelve months, including to:

Develop systems to better understand the condition of protected areas and for evaluating and improving conservation outcomes.



GOOD PRACTICE

The Service's *Natural Heritage Research: Plan, Policy and Procedures* was approved in 2002. It is on the Service's intranet and includes:

- research priorities
- procedures for developing and approving research projects
- guidance for developing research projects and undertaking research
- mechanisms for scientific review and approval of research projects
- criteria for review and approval
- a code of conduct for researchers.

Key aspects of existing policy yet to be implemented

Our field visits and discussions with staff indicate that key aspects of the *Natural Heritage Research: Plan, Policy and Procedures* have not been implemented. This would be an important element of a department-wide research framework. The *Plan, Policy and Procedures* will be considered as part of the abovementioned DEC review of science.

3.3 Information management model

A comprehensive information management model would improve analysis

It is important to manage information from all sources including research. The Service does not have a comprehensive information management model, being a step beyond the research framework. We suggest the Service develop a model in time. A good information management model:

- provides a framework for collecting and analysing data of importance to reserve management
- reflects the total range of important data, not just the data range that is available.

A model would help the Service:

- identify information gaps
- compare and analyse data from different sources
- develop databases and information collection strategies.

In addition to research data, the model would include:

- reference data, such as publications, maps, fire records, museum collections and air photos
- operational data, such as ambient temperatures, wind speeds, rainfall, fuel build up and site conditions
- information for land use decisions, such as that collected through the Comprehensive Regional Assessment underlying the Regional Forest Agreements.⁸

The creation of DEC presents the opportunity to develop a department-wide information management model.

The Service advises that its proposed *Land Information System* (designed to capture all relevant data from initial identification of an area of land as a proposed acquisition through to key conservation values and related files) coupled with *State of the Parks*, has the potential to improve information management.



We do, however, support the Service's commitment to nurturing its culture of formal and informal networking and collaboration. This is a Service strength, and its value should not be underestimated.

3.4 Data coverage and quality

There are some gaps in data coverage and quality

A research framework and information management model as described above would address some of the gaps in data coverage and quality. While complete knowledge is not possible, data on some reserves is described in Service documents as 'poor', while for others 'good'. Discussions with staff during our field visits confirmed that there is substantial variation in information quality and coverage across the Service, and it is not always sufficient or reliable.

There are reasons for this. Reserves subjected to Comprehensive Regional Assessment or near universities generally have better data, the latter benefiting from local cooperative research arrangements. Information about vegetation is generally better than about wildlife, as wildlife is transient and requires more sophisticated measurement techniques. European cultural heritage is generally better recorded than Aboriginal cultural heritage.

⁸ For more detail on the possible content and advantages of such a model, see Worboys, G et al, *Protected Area Management: Principles and Practice*, Oxford University Press.

4. Planning

Planning
at a glance

The Service faces a complex planning environment. Many reserves are remote, conservation and enjoyment must be balanced, and the place of reserves in local communities recognised.

Planning by the Service has strengths but could:

- focus more on measurable outcomes
- incorporate a standardised approach to risk management
- link better across the Service.

4.1 Focus on activities, processes and services

Limited focus on
outcomes

The Service's planning focuses on processes, activities and services with limited focus on outcomes. We suggest it could improve its planning by incorporating:

- specific and measurable objectives
- key desired outcomes clearly related to these objectives
- performance indicators for these outcomes.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Service is:

- not able to currently assess its outcomes reliably, like most reserve management agencies
- working on the difficult task of implementing outcomes-focused natural and cultural resource management.

4.2 Risk management

The management of risk is:

- recognised as better practice because it contributes to the efficient and effective use of limited resources
- an integral element of sound corporate governance.



The Service focuses on threats in its plans and strategies and won a Premier's Department Gold award for its Occupational Health and Safety Risk Management Program.

Case study: Bushfire risk management

The Service makes a substantial effort to manage bushfire risk, and places a strong emphasis on preparing for each bushfire season. The main priority is to protect life and property, and the Service concentrates on areas that can impact on neighbours and local communities.

Planned fires are an important weapon against dangerous fires. The Service pursues strategic programs of hazard reduction burning outside the fire season, between autumn and spring. The Service works with local District Bush Fire Management Committees, land managers and other fire agencies to determine the priorities and details of these strategic burn programs.

The Service maintains tens of thousands of kilometres of fire trails, tracks and roads that can be used for fire prevention and suppression.

Hazard reduction burning is complex, sometimes dangerous, and dependent on the weather. In many years there can be as few as 20 days in which the weather conditions are right for hazard reduction burning. The Service conducted 173 prescribed burns over more than 42,000 hectares during 2002-03.

The Service has more than 1350 staff trained in fire mitigation and direct fire fighting, including 900 on-ground fire fighters and 450 incident management personnel. Its equipment includes 26 heavy bushfire fighting tankers, 18 medium tankers, 172 light tankers, 32 bulldozers and a helicopter that can be used for specialist aerial fire fighting.

The Service works closely with the Rural Fire Service, NSW Fire Brigades, NSW State Forests and Sydney Catchment Authority to coordinate fire-related activities. The Service is a member of the Bush Fire Coordinating Committee and its various standing committees and working groups; and of all Bush Fire Management Committees where it has a reserve.

Structured risk management needs to be extended to all activities

The Service adopted a new risk management policy in 2002. The policy aims to extend structured risk management to all activities and levels in the Service in line with the Australian Standard. The Service is yet to achieve this. Key actions needed to implement the policy have not occurred as planned. After we raised this issue with the Service, it advised that the policy is being trialled in one Region.

4.3 Strategic and operational planning

As discussed above, the Service's planning does not focus strongly on outcomes. Within this constraint, we found the Service's strategic and operational planning has a number of strengths, including:

- central coordination provided through the corporate plan, Branch strategic plans, and Regional operational plans
- Branch strategic plans and Regional operational plans are prepared using a template derived from the corporate plan
- budgets are linked to these plans
- Branch Directors are involved in developing the Corporate plan, Regional Managers in Branch plans, Area Managers in Region plans
- plans are usually clearly written and comprehensive
- Branches and Regions have developed approaches to determine priorities and embed these in planning.

Case study: Rapid Priority Assessments

To address the absence of corporate priorities, one region we visited used a system of Rapid Priority Assessments for activities required in relation to each reserve arising from:

- its *Plan of Management*
- fire plans
- pest plans.

This was used to prioritise activities in each Area and reserve.



We also found:

- some Regions and Areas do not have current operational plans
- some actions in plans were not specific and measurable
- formal sign-off of plans by the accountable officer and his/her supervisor was not always evident.

4.4 Plans of Management

The *National Parks and Wildlife Act* requires:

- all reserves have a *Plan of Management* approved by the Minister
- plans be adopted as soon as practicable after a reserve is declared
- community input be sought in preparing plans
- plans be implemented
- only actions consistent with the plan be implemented.

As part of the process of developing and approving *Plans of Management*:

- the National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council reviews the *Plans* and provides advice to the Service and the Minister
- Regional Advisory Committees are extensively consulted
- draft plans are exposed for public comment.

The primary purpose of a *Plan of Management* is to provide a geographical overlay that indicates to management and stakeholders how a reserve is to be developed and managed.



The Service's *Plans of Management* have improved over time and:

- identify strategic risks and priority actions
- recognise cultural heritage and its importance for local communities
- document clearly the reasons why the reserve was created
- allocate the reserve to management categories
- utilise inventories of flora and fauna where available.

In line with good practice the Service:

- consults broadly in producing plans, with its techniques for public participation recognised nationally
- involves local staff in developing plans
- groups several reserves into one plan where warranted.

There are gaps in
Plans of Management

Plans of Management are not the primary driver in managing reserves their legal status suggests. Plans do not:

- focus on standards or incorporate related performance indicators and monitoring programs
- include timeframes for completion of activities.

Better practice suggests that *Plans of Management*:

- be integrated with strategic planning and budgeting
- facilitate the integration of performance monitoring, evaluation and reporting (the management cycle) for a reserve.

The Service has yet to achieve these attributes of better practice. The Service's strategic planning cycle is three years, with annual reviews and readjustments. *Plans of Management* have a projected lifespan of at least five years but often remain unchanged for much longer. The link between *Plans of Management* and overall priority setting and budget allocations is not obvious, while funding is not guaranteed even for 'high' priorities. Without timeframes the connection between preparing a plan and implementation is not specific.

The Service's manual for *Plans of Management* indicates that in writing and reviewing the plan, various checks for adequacy should be made, including:

... is the plan able to be implemented, given the available staff and financial resources.

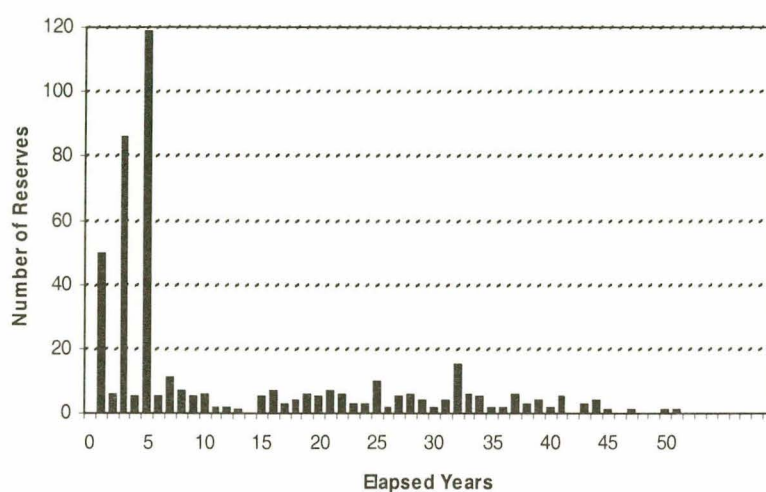
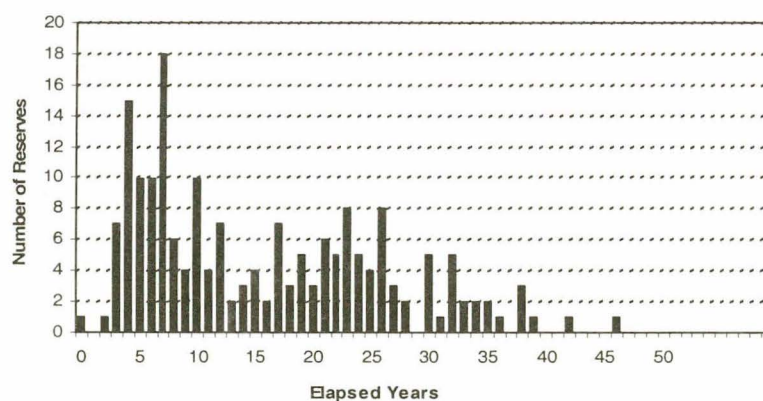
Due to resource constraints, a plan may not include all the significant actions that need to be taken to bring a reserve to an acceptable standard.

Limited reserve coverage and delays in finalizing *Plans of Management*

The law requires a *Plan of Management* be prepared and adopted as soon as practicable after a reserve is declared. Service policy is that plans be prepared within two years or as soon as practicable, but:

- less than one third of reserves have an approved plan
- a quarter of reserves have been without an approved *Plan of Management* for at least ten years
- half the reserves with plans were without one for more than ten years
- about 20 per cent of reserves have a draft plan and another 20 per cent have plans in preparation.

The Service is increasing its output of plans, but the number of reserves in its estate is also increasing. As a result, the proportion of reserves with *Plans of Management* has remained relatively constant for several years. The Service has had to contend with a recent period of rapid growth in its estate, with 40 per cent of its reserves declared in the last five years.

Figure 4.1 Time waiting for *Plans of Management* to be prepared**Figure 4.2** Time taken to produce *Plans of Management*

Source: Service data

The absence of a plan may advantage certain parties. For example, it could result in activities proceeding in part of a reserve that a plan may have prevented.

Where a *Plan of Management* does not exist, other plans (such as Fire Management Strategies, Regional Pest plans and *Statements of Interim Management Intent*) may guide management of these reserves. Reserves that do not have a *Plan of Management* or *Statement of Interim Management Intent* are covered by the Service's pre Plan of Management Policy, which requires that the reserve be managed in accordance with the 'precautionary principle' as defined in the *Protection of the Environment Act 1991*. None of these plans, policies or strategies, however, involve the rigorous level of community consultation and Ministerial approval that *Plans of Management* require.



**GOOD
PRACTICE**

Good practice is for planning effort to be focussed on higher status, high use reserves. Our analysis suggests that this is generally the case. For example, there are approved *Plans of Management* for all reserves with over:

- one million visitors per annum, and 80 per cent of reserves with between 100,000 to one million visitors per annum
- 10,000 neighbours, and 80 per cent of parks with between 1,000 and 10,000 neighbours.

However, we found the priority given to developing *Plans of Management* differed between Regions. We suggest the Service consider a centrally-driven approach to prioritising reserve planning effort.

The grouping of reserves into 'joint' plans is good practice. While this is occurring, there appears not to be a documented policy or strategy to guide managers in making decisions about whether and how to group plans.

4.5 A framework to guide *Plans of Management*

The Service has policies and procedures to guide the implementation of key programs and *Plans of Management*. But we suggest this valuable source of information could be more comprehensive and better integrated. For example:

- there is the NSW Biodiversity Strategy, but no such strategy for geological, European or Aboriginal heritage, or for recreation
- there is no overall framework to help managers balance the sometimes competing demands of preservation and enjoyment, or to balance biodiversity and cultural heritage.

A 1998 review of *Plans of Management* for the Service also identified this as an issue:⁹

There is no policy framework, that is a comprehensive, integrated and consistent set of broad policy statements, principles, criteria and objectives, on which to base the management of the reserved areas.

It would make not only for consistency, but also for less work if broad policies and principles were available to those preparing plans of management and if the basic implication of these to good management practice were laid down as part of these policy documents.

⁹ Australia Street Company for National Parks and Wildlife Service, *Plans of Management Review*, July 1998, p 10.

Over-arching framework needed

An overarching framework¹⁰ to guide *Plans of Management* would provide greater assurance that:

- plans are consistent
- plans do not inadvertently establish policy and precedent
- key issues are covered
- duplication is avoided.


Case study: Draft Recreational Planning Framework

A Branch developed a recreational planning strategy to:

- provide a strategic overview of recreational opportunities within its boundaries
- guide the *Plan of Management* process by providing a basis for determining what recreational uses and facilities are appropriate for individual reserves.

It is now being extended across the Service as part of an Ecotourism Strategy.

We suggest the Service consider developing broader, possibly regional or bioregional, conservation management strategies to provide overall planning direction, with individual plans cascading from these. New Zealand has adopted such an approach.

4.6 Threatened species recovery planning

The Service is not complying with requirement of Threatened Species Act

The Threatened Species Act requires recovery plans to be adopted within three years of a species being declared 'threatened'. The Scientific Committee established by this Act declares species threatened.

The Service is not complying with this requirement of the Act.

We note that:

- threatened species recovery planning is being transferred to the Science and Policy Division of the Department of Environment and Conservation
- the Act is being reviewed.

¹⁰ The Service has a Plan of Management manual and templates, but this is not designed to provide the framework of policies and principles we believe is necessary.

5. Resources

Resources
at a glance

This chapter examines the resources available to the Service and how it allocates them.

The Service's annual budget per hectare has doubled since 1991-92, but it is not possible to tell if this is sufficient because the Service cannot measure how well it uses current resources.

5.1 Budget per hectare

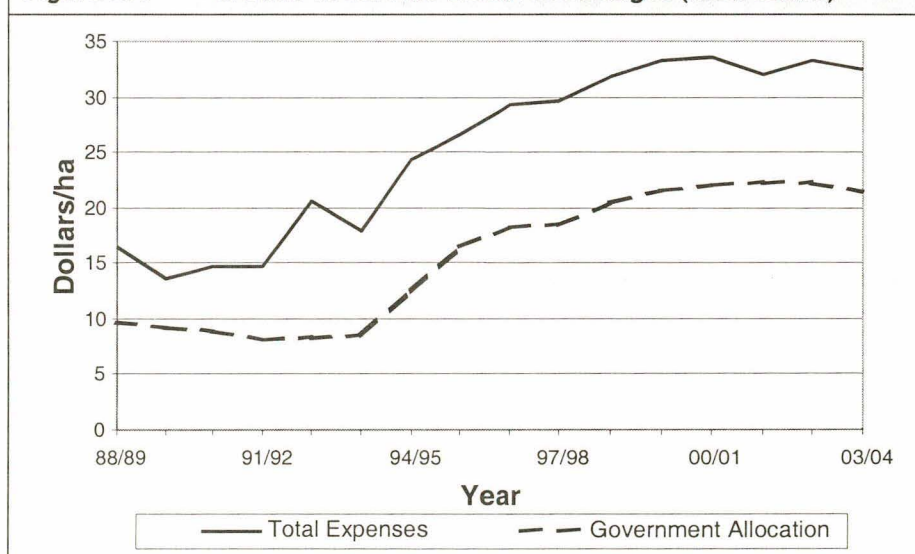
For 2003-04 Parliament appropriated:

- \$305.3 million for operating expenditure, and
- \$26.1 million for capital expenditure by the Service.

Funding per
hectare has
doubled since
1991-92

The Service's funding per hectare has doubled in real terms since 1991-92.

Figure 5.1 Growth in Service Recurrent Budget (Real terms)¹¹



The Service is not
able to determine
if this is sufficient

The Service is not in a position to know whether it has sufficient resources for ongoing management of reserves because it has not as yet been able to reliably assess:

- whether it is efficient and effective
- the condition of reserves, whether they are improving or declining, or what standard needs to be achieved
- what it is unable to do within the limits of current resources
- the risks and implications of the things it cannot do due to any lack of resources.

¹¹ Total includes government allocation from the consolidated fund, plus retained revenue, grants and subsidies etc. Some of the budget relates to off-reserve activities, but the Service could not quantify this.

5.2 Allocating resources

Branches and several Regions and Areas use quite sophisticated approaches to allocate financial resources to priority areas but limited information exists on which to base the allocation.¹²

Case study: Computerised Resource Allocation System

A computerised system to allocate operating funds to Regions developed by one Branch has now spread (with local modification) to other Branches, and is being used by some Regions to allocate funds to Areas. The system collates and weights a range of factors to assess relative management complexity/workload, and allocates funds accordingly. These factors include:

- total land area in the Region or Area
- total land area under management
- total perimeter of reserves
- number of local government areas
- number of neighbouring properties
- number of neighbouring owners
- number of visitors
- number of commercial operators within reserves
- value of assets within reserves.



The factors and the weightings are discussed and agreed by local management.

We suggest the Service consider adopting these approaches across the Service and also use them to allocate staff to Regions and Areas. The approaches would also benefit from any improvements in information on reserve condition, efficiency and effectiveness.

Distribution of spending

The Service estimates that in 2003-04 it will spend about 55 per cent of its budget on:

- threatened species and threatening processes (fire, pests and weeds) - about 15 per cent
- visitors - about 25 per cent¹³
- insurance - about 15 per cent.

¹² As discussed elsewhere the Service does not have reliable information on reserve condition, efficiency and effectiveness.

¹³ This includes components of asset maintenance, which are in accord with managing conservation values and visitor impacts.

The law requires the Service to provide opportunities for visitors to enjoy and appreciate reserves. We found no evidence that a business case has been prepared to support the level of expenditure on visitor management (and other areas). This may reflect the:

- inherent tension between conservation and visitor enjoyment (the objects of the Act)
- the absence of specific objectives and priorities (Chapter 2)
- absence of a structured risk management framework (Chapter 4).

**High spending
on visitors**

A higher level of expenditure on visitor management may be a result of pressure arising from the following:

- visitor impacts need to be managed in order to protect and conserve natural and cultural heritage in reserves
- visitors pay fees to enter or camp in certain reserves, and expect certain facilities and standards in return
- visitors are more likely to scrutinise the condition of infrastructure rather than natural heritage (as it may impact their level of enjoyment)
- the results of spending on visitor infrastructure are more immediate and tangible than spending on natural and cultural heritage
- there are community standards of health, safety and hygiene that need to be maintained for visitors
- the high number of visits per year, currently estimated at 22 million.

The Service advises it is developing a program called *Living Parks* which is intended to:

- provide a framework for allocating resources to visitor services and infrastructure
- facilitate sustainable investment in parks, providing benefits for regional economies and balancing tourism with conservation.

Living Parks will be overseen by the Advisory Council, and monitoring and reporting will be closely tied to *State of the Parks*.

5.3 Deferred maintenance backlog

The Service estimates it has a substantial and growing maintenance liability, and is currently implementing an asset management system which should enable it to quantify this liability.

The Service's cultural heritage register contains more than 9,000 assets, and may not be complete.

It regularly receives such assets from other government agencies, often in a state of disrepair, and without any ongoing funding for maintenance.

The Service advises that:

- a number of heritage assets require major work
- the register continues to grow, through expansion of the reserve system, discovery of additional assets in existing reserves, and assets reaching 25 years of age (that is becoming heritage assets).

The Service has received prestigious awards for its adaptive reuse of certain heritage buildings. Adaptive reuse generates:

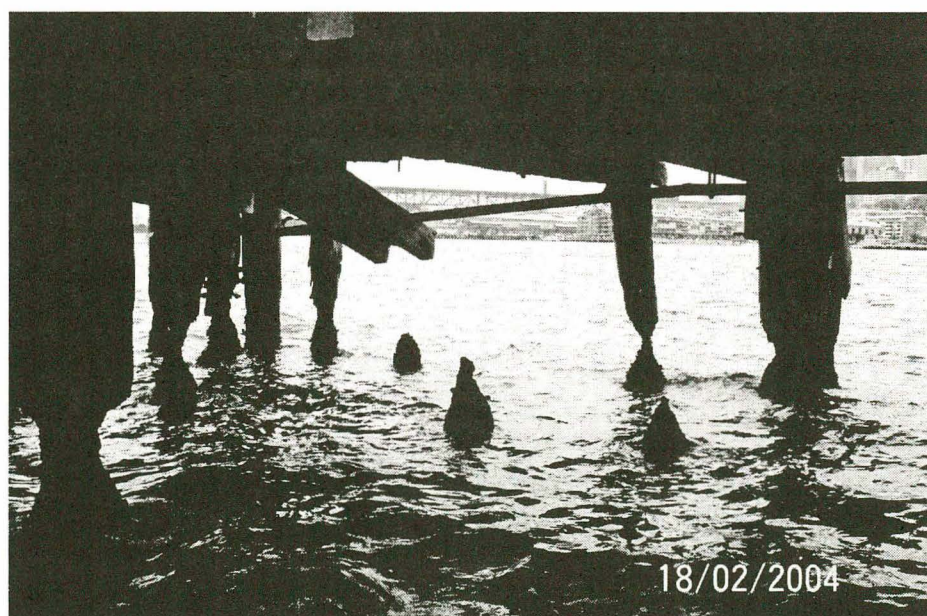


- increased public use, appreciation and enjoyment
- additional resources to assist in conserving these sites.

This strategy is likely to be uneconomic for most heritage sites and will have limited impact on the maintenance backlog.

Case study: Historic heritage maintenance

The following photographs illustrate the extent of deterioration of a wharf at Goat Island, in the Service's Sydney Region.



The Service advises that:

- the wharf has been assessed as having significant cultural heritage value
- it is closed to the public because it is unsafe
- if it collapsed, the debris would present a safety risk to harbour users
- the costs of repair and demolition were similar, and more than the total annual operating budget (ie non-staff budget) of the Region
- the Service has not yet decided what to do, and no funds for remediation work had been allocated.

The Region has several such assets requiring substantial urgent work.

5.4 Funding new land



The Service is responsible for securing the protection of a 'comprehensive, adequate and representative' reserve system in New South Wales. To support this role the Service has developed a computerised system to target priority land acquisitions. The system is now being used in South Africa. The Service's intranet site advertises the Reserve Establishment Guidelines and reports regularly on progress with land acquisitions. Recent acquisition priorities include:

- land within¹⁴ and adjoining existing reserves to achieve efficiencies in management and provide wildlife corridors
- land in the west of the State, which is currently under-represented in the Service's estate compared to land east of the Great Dividing Range.

No funding agreement despite six years of negotiations

The Service and NSW Treasury have negotiated for six years over funding for the ongoing management of new reserves. An agreement is yet to be reached. During this period of negotiation, the Government has provided approximately fifty per cent of the funds sought by the Service for this purpose.

While Treasury and the Service continue to negotiate cooperatively on this issue, we believe that negotiations need to be brought to an early conclusion so that the Service can make acquisition decisions with some certainty about future funding.

¹⁴ Called in-holdings, where unreserved land lies wholly within a reserve. It creates a 'swiss-cheese' reserve pattern, and increases the complexity and cost of management

6. Reporting

Reporting
at a glance

Chapter 6 considers whether reporting by the Service provides a basis for improving management performance and demonstrating accountability. We believe, overall, that it does not.

6.1 Public reporting

The Audit Office reviewed the content of the Service's 2002-03 annual report using the criteria identified at the end of this chapter. We concluded that the Service's annual report:

Public reporting
does not clarify
performance

- is based closely on the Corporate Plan, which is good practice
- provides important information on key activities and outputs
- does not identify what the Service achieved compared to what it planned to achieve (effectiveness)
- does not identify whether it is efficient or not.

We also suggest the Service's annual report:

- express objectives more specifically so that they can better be used in measuring and reporting results
- give a stronger focus to outcomes
- integrate financial and non-financial information to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness
- set quantifiable and time specific targets
- discuss setbacks or failures
- discuss results of trend data.

The *Threatened Species Act 1994* requires that a species recovery plan and threat abatement plan be prepared and placed on public exhibition within three years of a species being declared threatened.

The 'performance target' in its 2002-03 Annual Report was "increase in the number of threatened species recovery plans and threat abatement plans placed on public exhibition". The Report indicates that the number of such plans placed on public exhibition was much higher in 2002-03 than in 2001 (p 21).

The performance target is not clear about the level of increase the Service was seeking. The report also does not:

- acknowledge that despite this increase the Service was in breach of the law because some declared species had been without an exhibited plan for more than three years
- compare the above increase in activity to the rate of declaration of threatened species, and hence the need for plans
- indicate the success, or otherwise, of the above plans
- link the result to resources, to clarify whether the increase resulted from greater efficiency or more resources

The Service makes other reports to the public including:

- regional annual reports distributed to key stakeholders
- regular reports to Regional Advisory Committees and the Advisory Council
- reports on specific issues.

These reports:

- provide information on key issues, achievements, activities and outputs
- contribute strongly to the effective engagement of stakeholders
- generally did not indicate progress against plans or targets and did not report outcomes.

The *State of the Parks* initiative has the potential to improve the Service's reporting on reserve management.

6.2 Internal reporting

The Service prepares a quarterly report of progress against 'performance targets' to inform the Service's Executive on progress. This is called the Corporate Performance Report. We reviewed the Report for 30 June 2003 and concluded the Report, like the Service's Annual Report:

- provides important information to the Service's executive on key activities and outputs, but
- does not describe what the Service achieved compared to what it planned to achieve, nor comment on its efficiency.

Similarly, internal reporting does not clarify performance

In keeping with good practice, the Corporate Performance Report is based closely on the 2000-03 Corporate Plan. The Report however, does not redress shortcomings of the existing Corporate Plan. For example:

- most 'performance targets' are not specific or timetabled
- some 'performance targets' are less specific and measurable than in the Corporate Plan
- no data or information is presented for some 'performance targets'
- there is no analysis or explanation of performance below expectations
- it is not always clear whether a target has been achieved, even where the target was specific
- some information is possibly misleading
- there are no indicators of impact on the environment.

The Service's periodic internal reporting against operational and strategic plans needs to be more systematic and better documented to help management assess progress and make informed decisions. Most such reporting by Area and Regional Managers is oral at regular management meetings. Where written reports were submitted, they were activity focussed with little reference to targets, timelines or outcomes.

The Service also reports to a statutory Audit and Compliance Committee on a range of internal matters. This Committee:

- has responsibility to oversee compliance with the obligations imposed under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act*
- can investigate any matter relating to these obligations, request any information from the Director-General to assist them in these functions, and report directly to the Minister.

There is limited tracking of progress against *Plans of Management*

In Chapter 4 we commented that *Plans of Management* are not the primary driver of Service efforts in managing reserves, do not convey a clear statement as to standards sought, nor identify meaningful and measurable key performance indicators and targets or timeframes for actions.

It is important that progress against *Plans of Management* be tracked and reported and that monitoring be systematic, robust and comprehensive. There is an evident link between the importance given to *Plans of Management* and the tracking of progress against the plans. We found few examples of regular and systematic tracking and reporting of progress against *Plans of Management*.

6.3 Excessive reporting requirements

The cost of reporting must justify the benefits. The Service has numerous self-generated and externally-driven reporting requirements. Many of these reports endeavour to measure similar things. This is not efficient.

The Service agrees, and in early 2003 commenced a review to rationalise reporting arrangements. We encountered some frustration in the field at progress to date. In time '*State of the Parks*', if implemented as intended, should provide most information on efficiency and effectiveness sought by external agencies.

Figure 6.1 Analysis of the Service's 2002-03 Annual Report

Clear and measurable objectives	
<p>The annual report should be part of an agency's governance, management and accountability framework. There should be clear links between the report and the corporate plan.</p> <p>Objectives need to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ relevant, specific and, where possible, define impacts on the community, environment and economy ▪ measurable. 	<p>The objectives and strategies in the Service's annual report were consistent with those in the corporate plan.</p> <p>The objectives were stated in such general terms that it would be difficult for a reader to determine what the Service intended to achieve in the period, making them not useful for measuring and reporting results.</p>
Results and outcomes	
<p>The annual report should provide a clear discussion on what the agency planned to achieve, did achieve and plans to achieve in the future. This includes reporting on outputs delivered and outcomes to be achieved.</p> <p>Both efficiency and effectiveness indicators are needed to judge value for money and the overall performance of an agency.</p> <p>Discussing results without reference to the resources used to achieve them can lead to unrealistic expectations on the part of stakeholders. It is also difficult to judge whether or not a program or activity represents value for money.</p>	<p>Discussion in the Service's report was not sufficient to judge the efficiency and effectiveness of the Service. The report:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ included some discussion of plans and achievements ▪ focused on activities and outputs, not outcomes ▪ did not demonstrate the relationship between costs and results. <p>As discussed in chapter 2 and elsewhere, measuring and reporting outcomes presents a significant challenge the Service is seeking to address.</p>
Results in context	
<p>Targets set by an agency should provide measures against which readers can assess the success or otherwise of the agency's performance.</p> <p>Annual reports should include honest coverage of both successes and setbacks, and actions taken to address performance shortfalls or improve service standards. Robust performance reporting presents information that is fair and unbiased and raises the reader's confidence in its content.</p> <p>Where possible, the report should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ comparative (multi-year trend) data and a discussion and analysis of changes over time ▪ benchmarking against similar organisations. 	<p>The 'performance targets' in the Service's report were generally not quantified or time scheduled. Many of these were 'to increase' without saying by how much or by when. This makes it difficult to judge if results are good or bad.</p> <p>There was very little discussion of setbacks. Some indicators showing a decline in performance were included, but without explanation or discussion of the implications and remedial action.</p> <p>More trend information is needed to allow performance to be compared over time. The report did not compare results to similar organisations elsewhere, but this audit has identified the current difficulties in doing this.</p>
Explaining changes to reporting	
<p>Performance information should be reported consistently from one year to the next to allow readers to judge trends in performance. Removing redundant indicators or changing indicators does not diminish accountability or confidence when significant variances are explained.</p>	<p>Most 'performance targets' in the Service's annual report were from the corporate plan.</p> <p>Some were different to the corporate plan, and some corporate plan 'performance targets' were not reported, without explanation.</p>
Access and information	
<p>The annual report of an agency should be easily accessible and readable, as it is the primary means for Parliament and the public to judge the performance of an agency and how well it spends public money.</p>	<p>The Service's annual report is available on its internet site. It is written in simple English. It would benefit from a summary of performance information and graphics in the front.</p>

Appendices

Appendix 1

Terms Used in this Report

protected native animals	animals indigenous to Australia, ie excluding fauna listed in Schedule 11 of the Act
protected plants	plants native to Australia listed in Schedule 13 of the Act
Aboriginal heritage	sites, places and cultural landscapes that retain physical and non-physical manifestations of cultural heritage values of Aboriginal occupation and settlement
historic heritage	sites, places and cultural landscapes that retain physical and non-physical manifestations of cultural heritage values of human occupation and settlement after the arrival of non-indigenous people in Australia. Structures over 25 years old <u>may</u> constitute historic heritage
cultural heritage	the value people give to items through their association with those items. Examples include practices, art, buildings, paths
natural heritage	the value people give to native flora and fauna through their association with them
reserve	land gazetted as a national park, nature reserve etc under the Act
CAR system	conservation principle of comprehensiveness, adequacy and representativeness behind the development of the reserve network
Regional Forest Agreements (RFA)	arrangements, under the <i>Forestry and National Park Estate Act 1998</i> , between relevant NSW Ministers, for the transfer of certain state forests and Crown lands to Service reserves
Visions process	a review of Service activities in 1997 to mark its 30 th anniversary was called <i>Visions for the New Millennium</i> . The review identified actions for renewal and reform
'State of the Parks'	a report published three yearly, with the second due in late 2004, describing the condition of Service reserves
biodiversity	the variety of life forms, the different plants, animals and micro-organisms, the genes they contain and the ecosystems they form
management system	the process linking management objectives, strategy formulation, implementation, outcome measurement and review to evaluate the success of management and to inform strategy modification
precautionary principle	if there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation
adaptive management	a systematic process for continually improving management policies and practices by learning from the outcomes of operational programs
in-holding	private property or lease contained within a reserve
Ramsar wetland	globally significant wetland sites, protected by international convention. In managing Ramsar sites, the Service tries to preserve their unique ecological characteristics.
World Heritage listed area	globally recognised World Heritage list contains some of the most important examples of natural and cultural heritage in the world.

Appendix 2

About the Audit

Audit Objective

The objective of the audit was to examine and report on how well the Service protects and preserves the natural and cultural heritage in its terrestrial reserves. The audit considered the adequacy of the Service's:

- planning
- monitoring
- resourcing
- reporting and
- information systems

to support the natural and cultural heritage of NSW under the control of the Service.

Audit Scope and Focus

The audit examined the processes and procedures adopted by the Service to manage 'on-reserve' natural and cultural heritage, both at the agency and reserve level. The audit did not review:

- legislative or regulatory provisions of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*
- Government policies or any decisions of the Minister.

Audit Criteria

Audit criteria are reasonable standards against which to assess existing conditions. Our audit criteria (or reasonable standards) were (that there should be in place):

1. a clear link between the Service's legislative/government policy requirements and its strategic objectives for the management of 'on-reserve' natural and cultural assets
2. clearly stated goals (desired outcomes) for management of 'on-reserve' natural and cultural assets derived from the strategic objectives
3. a plan of programs and activities at both the agency and the reserve level for meeting the goals and strategic objectives for management of 'on-reserve' natural and cultural assets within a specified time-frame (both medium term and annual)
4. performance indicators and targets against which the achievement of goals for management of 'on-reserve' natural and cultural assets can be assessed, at both the agency and the reserve level
5. natural resource monitoring programs and internal reviews that provide data for assessing performance in managing 'on-reserve' natural and cultural assets
6. reporting which provides the CEO, Minister, Parliament and other stakeholders with reliable and well founded assurances that 'on-reserve' natural and cultural asset values are maintained, goals are met, and strategic objectives advanced.

The criteria were derived in part from *ANZECC Best Practice in Performance Reporting in Natural Resource Management, 1997*.

Audit approach	<p>The methodology used for the audit included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ a review of the requirements and provisions under relevant legislation▪ examination of relevant Service documents▪ review of management information systems and outputs▪ review of relevant reports from Australian and international audit offices and reserve management agencies▪ literature and newspaper searches and examination of case studies in relation to management in reserves▪ consultation with relevant staff as required at head office, Branch, Regional, Area and reserve level; and of other agencies▪ consultation with representatives of key stakeholders▪ comparisons where appropriate with other States and countries, relevant government and best practice guidelines. <p>The audit visited regional locations, including each Branch, and a selection of Regions, Areas and reserves across NSW. We agreed the schedule of visits with the Service. While the audit examined the Service's management from a global perspective, we focused on a selection of reserves as 'case studies'. These were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Royal National Park▪ Wambina Nature Reserve▪ Yuraygir National Park▪ Border Ranges National Park▪ Nadgee Nature Reserve▪ Bogandyera Nature Reserve▪ Sturt National Park▪ Oolambeyan National Park▪ Kosciuszko National Park <p>The Service and the Audit Office considered these reserves reasonably representative.</p>
Cost	<p>Including printing and all overheads the estimated cost of this audit is \$340,000.</p>
Audit Team	<p>Brian Holdsworth, Rod Longford and Denis Streater.</p>

Performance Audits by the Audit Office of New South Wales

Performance Auditing

What are performance audits?

Performance audits are reviews designed to determine how efficiently and effectively an agency is carrying out its functions.

Performance audits may review a government program, all or part of a government agency or consider particular issues which affect the whole public sector.

Where appropriate, performance audits make recommendations for improvements relating to those functions.

Why do we conduct performance audits?

Performance audits provide independent assurance to Parliament and the public that government funds are being spent efficiently and effectively, and in accordance with the law.

They seek to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government agencies and ensure that the community receives value for money from government services.

Performance audits also assist the accountability process by holding agencies accountable for their performance.

What is the legislative basis for Performance Audits?

The legislative basis for performance audits is contained within the *Public Finance and Audit Act 1983, Part 3 Division 2A*, (the Act) which differentiates such work from the Office's financial statements audit function.

Performance audits are not entitled to question the merits of policy objectives of the Government.

Who conducts performance audits?

Performance audits are conducted by specialist performance auditors who are drawn from a wide range of professional disciplines.

How do we choose our topics?

Topics for performance audits are chosen from a variety of sources including:

- our own research on emerging issues
- suggestions from Parliamentarians, agency Chief Executive Officers (CEO) and members of the public
- complaints about waste of public money
- referrals from Parliament.

Each potential audit topic is considered and evaluated in terms of possible benefits including cost savings, impact and improvements in public administration.

The Audit Office has no jurisdiction over local government and cannot review issues relating to council activities.

If you wish to find out what performance audits are currently in progress just visit our website at www.audit@nsw.gov.au.

How do we conduct performance audits?

Performance audits are conducted in compliance with relevant Australian standards for performance auditing and operate under a quality management system certified under international quality standard ISO 9001.

Our policy is to conduct these audits on a "no surprise" basis.

Operational managers, and where necessary executive officers, are informed of the progress with the audit on a continuous basis.

What are the phases in performance auditing?

Performance audits have three key phases: planning, fieldwork and report writing.

During the planning phase, the audit team will develop audit criteria and define the audit field work.

At the completion of field work an exit interview is held with agency management to discuss all significant matters arising out of the audit. The basis for the exit interview is generally a draft performance audit report.

The exit interview serves to ensure that facts presented in the report are accurate and that recommendations are appropriate. Following the exit interview, a formal draft report is provided to the CEO for comment. The relevant Minister is also provided with a copy of the draft report. The final report, which is tabled in Parliament, includes any comment made by the CEO on the conclusion and the recommendations of the audit.

Depending on the scope of an audit, performance audits can take from several months to a year to complete.

Copies of our performance audit reports can be obtained from our website or by contacting our publications unit.

How do we measure an agency's performance?

During the planning stage of an audit the team develops the audit criteria. These are standards of performance against which an agency is assessed. Criteria may be based on government targets or benchmarks, comparative data, published guidelines, agencies corporate objectives or examples of best practice.

Performance audits look at:

- processes
- results
- costs
- due process and accountability.

Do we check to see if recommendations have been implemented?

Every few years we conduct a follow-up audit of past performance audit reports. These follow-up audits look at the extent to which recommendations have been implemented and whether problems have been addressed.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) may also conduct reviews or hold inquiries into matters raised in performance audit reports. Agencies are also required to report actions taken against each recommendation in their annual report.

To assist agencies to monitor and report on the implementation of recommendations, the Audit Office has prepared a Guide for that purpose. The Guide, *Monitoring and Reporting on Performance Audits Recommendations*, is on the Internet at www.audit.nsw.gov.au/guides-bp/bpglist.htm

Who audits the auditors?

Our performance audits are subject to internal and external quality reviews against relevant Australian and international standards. This includes ongoing independent certification of our ISO 9001 quality management system.

The PAC is also responsible for overseeing the activities of the Audit Office and conducts reviews of our operations every three years.

Who pays for performance audits?

No fee is charged for performance audits. Our performance audit services are funded by the NSW Parliament and from internal sources.

For further information relating to performance auditing contact:

Stephen J Horne
Assistant Auditor-General
Performance Audit Branch
(02) 9285 0078
email: Stephen.horne@audit.nsw.gov.au

Performance Audit Reports

No.	Agency or Issue Examined	Title of Performance Audit Report or Publication	Date Tabled in Parliament or Published
64*	Key Performance Indicators	<i>Government-wide Framework Defining and Measuring Performance (Better practice Principles) Legal Aid Commission Case Study</i>	31 August 1999
65	Attorney General's Department	<i>Management of Court Waiting Times</i>	3 September 1999
66	Office of the Protective Commissioner Office of the Public Guardian	<i>Complaints and Review Processes</i>	28 September 1999
67	University of Western Sydney	<i>Administrative Arrangements</i>	17 November 1999
68	NSW Police Service	<i>Enforcement of Street Parking</i>	24 November 1999
69	Roads and Traffic Authority of NSW	<i>Planning for Road Maintenance</i>	1 December 1999
70	NSW Police Service	<i>Staff Rostering, Tasking and Allocation</i>	31 January 2000
71*	Academics' Paid Outside Work	<i>Administrative Procedures Protection of Intellectual Property Minimum Standard Checklists Better Practice Examples</i>	7 February 2000
72	Hospital Emergency Departments	<i>Delivering Services to Patients</i>	15 March 2000
73	Department of Education and Training	<i>Using Computers in Schools for Teaching and Learning</i>	7 June 2000
74	Ageing and Disability Department	<i>Group Homes for people with disabilities in NSW</i>	27 June 2000
75	NSW Department of Transport	<i>Management of Road Passenger Transport Regulation</i>	6 September 2000
76	Judging Performance from Annual Reports	<i>Review of Eight Agencies' Annual Reports</i>	29 November 2000
77*	Reporting Performance	<i>Better Practice Guide A guide to preparing performance information for annual reports</i>	29 November 2000
78	State Rail Authority (CityRail) State Transit Authority	<i>Fare Evasion on Public Transport</i>	6 December 2000

No.	Agency or Issue Examined	Title of Performance Audit Report or Publication	Date Tabled in Parliament or Published
79	TAFE NSW	<i>Review of Administration</i>	6 February 2001
80	Ambulance Service of New South Wales	<i>Readiness to Respond</i>	7 March 2001
81	Department of Housing	<i>Maintenance of Public Housing</i>	11 April 2001
82	Environment Protection Authority	<i>Controlling and Reducing Pollution from Industry</i>	18 April 2001
83	Department of Corrective Services	<i>NSW Correctional Industries</i>	13 June 2001
84	Follow-up of Performance Audits	<i>Police Response to Calls for Assistance</i> <i>The Levying and Collection of Land Tax</i> <i>Coordination of Bushfire Fighting Activities</i>	20 June 2001
85*	Internal Financial Reporting	<i>Internal Financial Reporting including a Better Practice Guide</i>	27 June 2001
86	Follow-up of Performance Audits	<i>The School Accountability and Improvement Model (May 1999)</i> <i>The Management of Court Waiting Times (September 1999)</i>	14 September 2001
87	E-government	<i>Use of the Internet and Related Technologies to Improve Public Sector Performance</i>	19 September 2001
88*	E-government	<i>e-ready, e-steady, e-government: e-government readiness assessment guide</i>	19 September 2001
89	Intellectual Property	<i>Management of Intellectual Property</i>	17 October 2001
90*	Intellectual Property	<i>Better Practice Guide</i> <i>Management of Intellectual Property</i>	17 October 2001
91	University of New South Wales	<i>Educational Testing Centre</i>	21 November 2001
92	Department of Urban Affairs and Planning	<i>Environmental Impact Assessment of Major Projects</i>	28 November 2001
93	Department of Information Technology and Management	<i>Government Property Register</i>	31 January 2002
94	State Debt Recovery Office	<i>Collecting Outstanding Fines and Penalties</i>	17 April 2002

No.	Agency or Issue Examined	Title of Performance Audit Report or Publication	Date Tabled in Parliament or Published
95	Roads and Traffic Authority	<i>Managing Environmental Issues</i>	29 April 2002
96	NSW Agriculture	<i>Managing Animal Disease Emergencies</i>	8 May 2002
97	State Transit Authority Department of Transport	<i>Bus Maintenance and Bus Contracts</i>	29 May 2002
98	Risk Management	<i>Managing Risk in the NSW Public Sector</i>	19 June 2002
99	E-government	<i>User-friendliness of Websites</i>	26 June 2002
100	NSW Police Department of Corrective Services	<i>Managing Sick Leave</i>	23 July 2002
101	Department of Land and Water Conservation	<i>Regulating the Clearing of Native Vegetation</i>	20 August 2002
102	E-government	<i>Electronic Procurement of Hospital Supplies</i>	25 September 2002
103	NSW Public Sector	<i>Outsourcing Information Technology</i>	23 October 2002
104	Ministry for the Arts Department of Community Services Department of Sport and Recreation	<i>Managing Grants</i>	4 December 2002
105	Department of Health Including Area Health Services and Hospitals	<i>Managing Hospital Waste</i>	10 December 2002
106	State Rail Authority	<i>CityRail Passenger Security</i>	12 February 2003
107	NSW Agriculture	<i>Implementing the Ovine Johne's Disease Program</i>	26 February 2003
108	Department of Sustainable Natural Resources Environment Protection Authority	<i>Protecting Our Rivers</i>	7 May 2003
109	Department of Education and Training	<i>Managing Teacher Performance</i>	14 May 2003
110	NSW Police	<i>The Police Assistance Line</i>	5 June 2003
111	E-Government	<i>Roads and Traffic Authority Delivering Services Online</i>	11 June 2003
112	State Rail Authority	<i>The Millennium Train Project</i>	17 June 2003
113	Sydney Water Corporation	<i>Northside Storage Tunnel Project</i>	24 July 2003

No.	Agency or Issue Examined	Title of Performance Audit Report or Publication	Date Tabled in Parliament or Published
114	Ministry of Transport Premier's Department Department of Education and Training	<i>Freedom of Information</i>	28 August 2003
115	NSW Police NSW Roads and Traffic Authority	<i>Dealing with Unlicensed and Unregistered Driving</i>	4 September 2003
116	NSW Department of Health	<i>Waiting Times for Elective Surgery in Public Hospitals</i>	18 September 2003
117	Follow-up of Performance Audits	<i>Complaints and Review Processes (September 1999)</i> <i>Provision of Industry Assistance (December 1998)</i>	24 September 2003
118	Judging Performance from Annual Reports	<i>Review of Eight Agencies' Annual Reports</i>	1 October 2003
119	Asset Disposal	<i>Disposal of Sydney Harbour Foreshore Land</i>	26 November 2003
120	Follow-up of Performance Audits NSW Police	<i>Enforcement of Street Parking (1999)</i> <i>Staff Rostering, Tasking and Allocation (2000)</i>	10 December 2003
121	Department of Health NSW Ambulance Service	<i>Code Red: Hospital Emergency Departments</i>	15 December 2003
122	Follow-up of Performance Audit	<i>Controlling and Reducing Pollution from Industry (April 2001)</i>	12 May 2004
123	National Parks and Wildlife Service	<i>Managing Natural and Cultural Heritage in Parks and Reserves</i>	June 2004

* Better Practice Guides

Performance Audits on our website

A list of performance audits tabled or published since March 1997, as well as those currently in progress, can be found on our website www.audit.nsw.gov.au

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