

**THE MANAGEMENT OF NATIONAL PARKS AS IT AFFECTS OIL  
AND GAS EXPLORERS**

by

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'About 26% of nation off-limits to miners' headed an article in the Courier-Mail newspaper of 27 June 1990. The article proceeded to show that the off-limit areas were growing annually. The article stated that of the 26%, 5.6% was excluded because it lay inside national parks, reserves, or other conservation areas.

Within Queensland, the Government is committed to doubling the existing national park estate from 2% of the State to 4% by the end of 1992. Management of this estate is in the hands of the Director of National Parks and Wildlife whose guiding principle for management is spelt out clearly within the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974-1989. Section 25 states, 'The cardinal principle to be observed in the management of National Parks shall be the permanent preservation, to the greatest possible extent, of their natural condition ...'. The only activities permitted which derogate from that Section are specified as exceptions in other Sections such as those covering tourist use or roads within parks.

Interference with national parks for oil and gas exploration and extraction is only permitted through the medium of the Petroleum Act 1923-1988 which provides through the Petroleum Regulations (Land) that it be undertaken only within such terms, conditions and restrictions as fixed by the Director, National Parks and Wildlife.

In recent years few applications have been made to undertake exploratory works on national parks and the Service is not in a position to predict likely demand trends. What is certain in today's climate of increasing environmental awareness is that restrictions imposed by present legislation will not be eased. The most likely outcome will be increasingly stringent performance standards for such work as is undertaken on national parks. Issuance of approvals by the Director will follow only from detailed assessments of impact and prospects for rehabilitation. Pending Freedom of Information legislation and the prospects of Administrative Appeals Tribunals will ensure that the basis and legitimacy of the Director's decisions will be open to public scrutiny, and appeal.

Co-operation has been a key to the acceptance of proposals and performance standards have generally been met by the majority of companies in recent years but the Service still encounters difficulties occasionally through companies promising much, including impressive environmental guidelines, and then ignoring these once approval is gained. An alternative is to hide behind a range of subsidiary or farmed out arrangements once problems arise.

While the few, and I must stress that they are few, difficult operators represent little more than a nuisance to the Service, their performance tends to become the yardstick for public perception of performance generally.

Environmental safeguards should be proposed by applicants through their own staff or credible environmental consultants. It is not the responsibility of the Service to have expertise in oil and gas exploration technology and the likely environmental impacts. The Director is in a position to assess the gross impact on the environment and the likely success of rehabilitation attempts. The costs have to be met on a user pays basis.

Trends toward low environmental impact technology may be the only hope that the industry has with respect to future exploration on the increasing Service estate. The existence of Governments firmly committed to sound conservation principles and with knowledgeable but practical Ministers responsible for 'wise use' of our natural resources means that oil and gas exploration on national parks may be expected to continue in Queensland in the foreseeable future, but it will come at a price of better environmental safeguards developed and implemented by the oil and gas exploration industries.