



Government of **Western Australia**
Conservation and Parks Commission

**Position Statement no.16:
Periodic performance assessment
of the implementation of
management plans**

August 2020

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This document may be cited as:

Western Australian Conservation and Parks Commission (2020). *Position Statement: Periodic performance assessment of the implementation of management plans*. Kensington, Perth: Conservation and Parks Commission.

Current from	17 August 2020	For Review	August 2022
Version	2.0	Replaces	1.0
Officer responsible	Director, CPC	File / Document No.	A1510862

The Commission's Position

The Conservation and Parks Commission considers performance assessment to be a vital component of good governance. To be effective, performance assessment should occur on a periodic, or cyclical, basis to enable the condition of the conservation estate and the effectiveness of management actions to be measured over time. To reinforce its importance, undertaking periodic assessment is a statutory requirement of the Commission.

Performance assessment raises awareness of the importance of protected areas for biodiversity conservation and community well-being. It promotes accountability and invites public support for conservation actions. It also demonstrates to the community that the managing body is willing to address problems. When done well, performance assessment should improve management effectiveness by contributing to better informed priority setting and the identification of inefficient processes.

Performance assessment provides an opportunity for park managers to highlight their conservation management challenges. The knowledge gained informs policy and planning decisions. The outcomes of performance assessment also assist in promoting a practice of adaptive management.

The Commission will deliver a periodic performance assessment program that reflects best practice. The program will have the following features:

- Demonstrated accountability in the management of public assets.
- Adoption of a consistent systematic approach across the State.
- Use of standard assessment methodologies to ensure comparability across different sites.
- Incorporation of a balance in quantitative and qualitative assessment approaches.
- Capture of experiential knowledge of park managers.
- An intention to inform both system-wide and park level planning and decision-making.
- A goal of improving understanding of the effectiveness of management activities.
- A focus on reporting on achievement of management outcomes.
- Communication of benefits of periodic assessment processes.
- Raising public awareness about important values and management challenges.
- Self-evaluation to drive continuous improvement.

Context and Background

LEGISLATION

Under the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* (CALM Act), State forest, timber reserves, marine reserves, national parks, conservation parks and nature reserves are vested, solely or jointly with another body, in the Conservation and Parks Commission. These lands and waters are mostly under the management of the Department of Parks and Wildlife. The Department prepares proposed management plans for Commission endorsement and subsequent Ministerial approval.

Section 19(1)(g) of the CALM Act establishes that it is the function of the Commission:

“in relation to management plans for land and waters vested in or under the care, control, and management of the Commission, whether solely or jointly with a joint responsible body:-

- (i) to develop guidelines for monitoring; and
- (ii) to set periodic criteria for evaluating; and
- (iii) to conduct periodic assessments of,

the implementation of the management plans by those responsible for implementing them, including the CEO and, if the land is State forest or a timber reserve, the Forest Products Commission”.

This legislative requirement to conduct periodic assessments ensures accountability and it is important for the credibility of the Commission and management bodies that evaluations are appropriately reported.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Commission has statutory and moral obligation to meet regarding the lands and waters vested in it. The Commission needs to know:

- which reserves, and their values, meet performance targets and which do not; and
- assess how well the reserves conserve our natural and cultural heritage and facilitate sustainable recreational use.

It is the Commission’s desire for periodic assessments to be carried out with clear and measurable objectives. The focus of assessments will be on continual improvement rather than judgement and appointment of blame, i.e. finding facts and not faults and to help and not hinder.

The goals of the periodic assessment will be strategically aligned with the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions’ corporate strategy and goals. Similar consideration will need to be given to other bodies’ strategic plans and objectives such as the Forest Products Commission for State Forests and the Department of Fisheries for marine reserves.

Periodic assessments will be led by the Office of the Conservation and Parks Commission and require the support of those responsible for implementing management plans.

The objectives of a periodic assessment will be to:

1. determine what is happening in the protected area estate/natural environment;
2. establish why it is happening;
3. determine its significance for achieving management plan outcomes; and
4. establish what park managers are doing about it.

Attributes of effective assessment systems

Organisations need information which is both relevant to the context of their particular protected area governance system and regularly updated to track progress towards agreed objectives. The Commission will work towards successful assessments by ensuring that the entity undergoing assessment has strong interest in the results and its implementation.

The most valuable attribute of evaluation is repetition. Repeat assessments allow for tracking of improvements against benchmarked assessments over time, greater expectation that results of assessments are implemented, stimulate locally driven self-reflection and management improvements if on-ground managers know their efforts will be acknowledged.

The Commission will develop periodic assessment methodologies and processes that:

- involve managers reflecting on the results of the assessment and allowing them to make timely adjustments that are apparent and achievable;
- encourage a process of reflection and questioning of the assessment results into future planning and decision making processes;
- allow for the development of information management systems that make the data readily accessible and building decision support systems that link relevant data sets together to help identify strategies and actions that increase effectiveness;
- are cost effective - running detailed effectiveness evaluations on each single site is unrealistic as well as being expensive and possibly a wasteful exercise; and
- apply the 'keeping it small and simple' approach through application of risk-based prioritisation process which considers values and threats.

EFFICIENCIES

The Commission will develop methodologies which take advantage of identified synergies between different reporting requirements such as assessments of species' and habitats' conservation status, annual reports (those that go beyond input/output reporting), knowledge management systems, and drafting /redrafting of management plans. Integrating and systematizing these different sources of information can avoid duplication of efforts and thus save costs. Methodologies need to be appropriate to

normalise evaluations so that assessments across different sites are comparable, for instance through the use of standard key performance indicators.

EFFECTIVE INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The Commission will seek to increase the efficiency of periodic assessment projects through effective use of data management systems. Effective data management systems for both data storage and manipulation will save valuable time.

Human judgement is a central component of periodic assessments, and its importance rises if data is lacking, of limited quality or highly complex. When park managers and their staff provide the bulk of information, this source inherently introduces a variety of biases to the evaluation process. The Commission will seek to eliminate major sources of bias through diversifying sources of information (e.g. stakeholder workshops, streamlining of various reporting mechanisms) and diversification of interpretation (e.g. through the involvement of internal and external experts, research organisations or managers of other protected areas, in interpreting information and rating performance).

TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Accountability, biodiversity and ecosystem services are public goods. The ultimate provider of public funding for protected areas is the community of Western Australia. The public has a right to know whether its money is being well spent. Depersonalised information on protected area performance should be available to the public unless disclosure is directly detrimental to the goals of conservation. The findings and recommendations of performance assessments provide a valuable resource that should be used to guide decision-making and reserve management.

Performance assessment objectives are prioritised (based on factors such as importance to ongoing management, validity, specificity and cost-effectiveness) and reviewed at appropriate intervals to ensure relevance and usefulness.

Internal and external stakeholder groups (including managers, operational staff and community groups) will be informed about and/or involved in performance assessment where appropriate to achieve greater acceptance, ownership and commitment to the performance measurement process.

Stakeholders will be kept informed of the findings and recommendations of performance assessments.

ADAPTATION – REGULAR REVIEWS

Effective learning occurs through trial and error. The current methodologies developed by the former Conservation Commission and Marine Parks and Reserves Authority have been designed and redesigned over years. Regular review and refinement of the methodologies should show that some indicators and processes have proved valuable, some may be dropped, and others may be added. Ideally there should remain some compatibility between versions, but adaptation and revisions are valuable steps in an on-going process.

Institutionalisation of a culture of evaluation, and especially support from the agency's executives are fundamental to success. Periodic assessment methods and processes can only be implemented effectively with sufficient training and support for staff. Subject to budget, the Commission will seek to allocate sufficient resources for periodic assessments to enable the purpose and objectives of each of the assessments to be achieved.

An adaptive management culture involves cycles of reflection and learning from performance assessments to achieve continuous improvement in management performance. The Commission will include opportunities for reflection and evaluation as part of its own continuous improvement cycle.

References

The Commission has drawn from the following sources in setting out its position statement to reflect best practice in the management of the conservation estate:

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