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Ms Emily Roper
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Dear Ms Roper *Emily*

DEVELOPING THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S ABORIGINAL EMPOWERMENT STRATEGY

Thank you for your letter received in this office on 16 January 2020 providing the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper *Developing an Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy for the WA Government*. DBCA supports the development of an Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

DBCA is the lead conservation agency in Western Australia and currently manages over 31 million hectares of land and water, with over 2.5 million hectares operating under joint management agreements in partnership with Aboriginal people. All conservation lands and waters are managed to protect the value of the land to the culture and heritage of Aboriginal people. It is anticipated that by 2025 over 30 per cent of the conservation estate will be jointly managed with Aboriginal people.

Recent McGowan Government commitments such as the Aboriginal Ranger Program and Plan for Our Parks means that the role of DBCA in protecting biodiversity and managing conservation lands requires the department to build its capacity for engagement with, and empowerment of, Aboriginal people in order to achieve the expectations set for these programs.

The formal recognition of Aboriginal culture and heritage protection in the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* in 2011, has accelerated the department's engagement with and development of effective partnerships with Aboriginal people across the State which is recognised as being integral to achieving mutually beneficial goals.

Fundamental to this engagement has been DBCA's development of a suite of policies, strategies and training programs that have improved the department's capacity to engage with, and build lasting relationships and partnerships with Aboriginal people.

In recent years, Aboriginal engagement has expanded and developed to involve almost every aspect of the department's work including reserve creation, science, recreation and tourism operations, conservation land management, fire management, wildlife management and heritage protection; much of which is being enabled through formal and informal joint management and partnership initiatives.



The range of Aboriginal engagement activities and management responses occurring within the department can be grouped into the following strategic themes:

- Aboriginal cultural and heritage values;
- land and water management;
- legislation, policy and leadership;
- Aboriginal economic participation;
- workforce development; and
- monitoring and evaluation.

A Framework for Aboriginal Community Engagement is being developing by DBCA which will enable a structured and coordinated approach to facilitating agreed and effective engagement processes between DBCA, Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal partners and other stakeholders over a five-year timeframe. It will be a whole-of-department strategy that will be developed to complement and align with the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy.

Specific comments on aspects of the discussion paper include:

- DBCA endorses the fundamental goal of the strategy, that Government acknowledges Aboriginal people's vision to determine their own futures. Achieving this will require lasting change in the relationships between Aboriginal people and Government. DBCA is committed to contributing to this outcome by building and strengthening relationships with traditional owners through conservation and joint management arrangements.
- The current and likely future components of the framework can only be effective if Aboriginal people are involved at all levels in the development, design and implementation of policies and strategies.
- DBCA supports the need for a strong and transparent accountability mechanism that will periodically review the strategy. DBCA is committed to contributing to evaluating and reporting on progress towards meeting the relevant outcomes.
- Any Government commitment to improve social, economic, health and cultural outcomes can only be effective if there is collaboration with Aboriginal people.
- DBCA supports an engagement structure that is accountable, inclusive, acknowledges cultural diversity and has the intent of establishing governance structures that will respond to regional and local differences.
- A whole-of-Government strategy will strengthen DBCA's efforts and other agencies' activities to enhance the Government's commitment to the Our Priorities: Sharing Prosperity program, the Joint Council on Closing the Gap and elements of the Service Priority Review.

DBCA believes that the Aboriginal Empowerment Strategy will provide greater impetus for Government agencies to work together collaboratively and strengthen Government commitments to deliver improved outcomes for Aboriginal people.

Yours sincerely



Mark Webb
DIRECTOR GENERAL

27 February 2020