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To whom it may concern

Re: House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations May 2015

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations. As an organisation that is not listed on the Register and hence does not stand to gain or lose directly from the Inquiry, the APS is well placed to offer independent comment. We draw the Committee's attention to the APS Position Statement on Psychology and the Natural Environment, based on a comprehensive Literature Review, and to a number of related submissions made to Government inquiries in recent years. These resources can be accessed at: <http://www.psychology.org.au/community/public-interest/environment/>.

The stated purpose of this Inquiry is to inquire into and report on the administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations (the Register) and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment. This APS submission addresses the following two terms of reference in particular:

- the definition of 'environmental organisation' under the *Income Tax Assessment Act 1997*, including under Subdivision 30-E;
- activities undertaken by organisations currently listed on the Register and the extent to which these activities involve on-ground environmental works.

Environmental organisations can have many functions and specialisations, and some have more than one focus, with activities ranging from advocacy and seeking to influence policy directly, to raising public awareness and through to on-ground activities to enhance particular environments.

The APS contribution to this Inquiry is to identify the psychological and community wellbeing benefits, as well as the benefits to local and global environments, of both advocacy and on-the-ground activities performed by environmental organisations. The APS believes that both types of activity have a legitimate and valuable role in pursuit of environmental groups' charitable purpose to protect and enhance the natural environment.

Acting in pursuit of a public good is legitimately charitable

The natural environment is a common good, and there is a vast range of activities aimed at protecting and enhancing the natural environment which are squarely in the public's interest. Whether environmental organisations are engaged in activities to protect the local environment or ecosystems, or in addressing the global threat of climate change, they are all pursuing activities that should be deemed to be in pursuit of a public good.

Protecting local ecosystems is a public good

The health and biodiversity of natural environments and ecosystems are essential to human health and wellbeing. Beyond their importance for 'healthy', life-supporting ecosystems and uncontaminated air, water, and food, along with the health care advances that have come from areas of protected significant biodiversity, biodiversity is also profoundly important for meeting psychological needs of hope and inspiration, connection to the natural world, restoration, recreation, and identity. Overall, healthy ecosystems make an essential contribution to our quality of life (see the APS Submission to the 2011 House of Representatives Inquiry into [Australia's Biodiversity in a Changing Climate](#)).

The existence and flourishing of natural environments constitutes a very meaningful symbolic message, even more so in a troubled and changing world. They convey the message that we live in a naturally ordered world of beauty, peace, inspiration, hope, and transcendence. The availability of natural environments for humans affords us a personal connection with a coherent and meaningful world (e.g., Hartig & Staats, 2003; Uzzell & Moser, 2006; Hartig, 2007).

In addition to the symbolic meaning of healthy natural environments, psychological research has demonstrated their importance for stress reduction, recreation, and restoring a sense of wellbeing, as well as enabling people to feel a part of the natural environment. Research on people's interactions with nationally important ecosystems such as World Heritage Areas (Bentrupperbäumer & Reser, 2008) highlights positive impacts including quality of life, a sense of place and belonging, self-identity, restoration and inspiration. Other research on the restorative benefits of natural environments and settings has found that biodiversity in natural environments is important for human health and wellbeing (Maas et al., 2006; Maller et al., 2006), and has a particularly positive effect on mood, attention and cognition.

Campaigning and political advocacy by environmental organisations has been and continues to be essential in protecting ecosystems and wildlife. For decades, large environmental advocacy groups have played key roles in protecting forests, threatened species and world-heritage areas, from the first national parks in the US in the 19th century to protection of the Great Barrier Reef, and the Leadbeater Possum in Victoria. At a local level, community-based environmental organisations also work to protect their natural environments (e.g., multiple 'friends' groups like Friends of Merri Creek, planting, weeding, removing rubbish, assessing water quality, or surveying birds in their particular areas of responsibility). Environmental groups rely heavily on donations to carry out the work they do to protect and enhance the local environments. If these activities are reduced owing to loss of each organisation's income (when loss of tax deductibility deters donors, or if tax exemption status is removed), the restorative qualities of many natural environments are likely to be threatened.

Restoring a safe climate is a public good

Climate change is regarded as the biggest global human health threat of the 21st Century (Costello et al., 2009). Health scientists are telling us that climate change will bring increased asthma, more virulent allergens, medical emergencies from heat stress, the spread of water- and vector-borne diseases and increased injury from severe weather events (Hughes & McMichael, 2011). Climate change also has significant impacts on people's psychological and mental health (Clayton et al., 2014).

The Cancun global climate talks in 2010 recommended that global and national emissions must be cut dramatically if the world is to avoid two degrees warming. Achieving this target requires strong climate policy. Environmental groups which advocate for policies strong enough to protect current and future generations from the

impacts of global warming should therefore be deemed legitimately charitable. This sort of advocacy is in pursuit of the public good of a safe climate.

Campaigning to stimulate public debate should be supported

Many of the activities of environmental groups involve advocating for outcomes by generating public awareness and debate over an issue and, through that, arguing for legislative and/or policy change to protect the environment. Organisations have a right to enter into public debate or criticism of the Commonwealth, its agencies, employees, servants or agents. We understand that the High Court of Australia in the [Aid/Watch](#) decision has previously clarified that advocacy activities aimed at policy or legislative change will not exclude an organisation from being classified as a charity.

Tax deductibility status increases willingness to donate to causes, which has psychological benefits

Donating to worthy causes and volunteering have important psychological benefits. There is considerable research in psychology that shows the value to mental health of donating time and money to organisations (e.g., increasing happiness, improving self-esteem, helping people feel more connected to the rest of the world: Strahilevitz, 2011; Borgonovi, 2008; Binder & Freytag, 2013). Volunteering for environmental organisations can give people a sense of community, enabling them to live out their values; enhance personal meaning and satisfaction; and build self-efficacy and a sense of civic responsibility (e.g., Harre, 2011; American River Network, 2000; Shapiro, 1995; Johnson et al., 2007). Environmental volunteering can provide people with a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves, which helps them develop a sense of place and belonging. Gooch (2003) found that issues of belonging and identity are bound up in a person's decision to volunteer and become responsible for caring for special places. People develop a strong affinity with land and waterways because their involvement in land and river care brings and reinforces a sense of attachment to the places they look after.

Taking away environmental organisations' tax deductibility status risks reducing people's willingness to donate to causes, thus limiting the psychological benefits that are accrued. Furthermore, erosion of their funding base through loss of DGR and reduction in donations is likely to result in some local environmental organisations having to reduce their activities, if not to cease operating altogether. This would in turn reduce or remove the individual and community wellbeing benefits these organisations create (as well as the direct outcomes for environments). The demise of local environmental organisations that depend on DGR status for donations would remove the opportunities for people to volunteer to work with them, and with that the many psychological benefits available from volunteering referred to above.

The probable consequences of climate change are a source of fear and anxiety to many people (Reser et al., 2011; Clayton et al., 2014). Taking action to address a source of anxiety is one of the most potent ways to manage it (Reser, Bradley & Ellul, 2012). Donating time or money to a group that is working to address climate change is thus one of the most self-efficacious actions individuals can take to do this, and is sometimes the only action available to an individual. Anything that detracts from the likelihood of taking such action is therefore likely to have detrimental effects on the mental health and self-efficacy of those who feel anxious and helpless in the face of such an overwhelming issue.

Conclusion

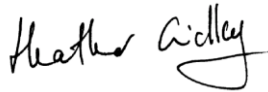
This inquiry into the tax deductibility status of environmental groups is a matter of concern to the APS for the reasons outlined above. Foreseeable outcomes include the

removal of the charitable status of those groups deemed to be diverting too much of their resources to political activity. Curtailing the lawful activities of such groups by preventing advocacy would restrict public engagement on important issues within our community and the opportunity for people to address the source of their anxiety by helping reduce the negative consequences for our environment, our climate, and ultimately our health and wellbeing.

Effective action on climate change requires widespread changes in behaviour, policy, and systems all over the world. Advocacy is often about addressing these systemic issues rather than just local problems. Thus it could be argued that advocacy is an even more efficient use of resources for protecting the environment than efforts spent on local on-the-ground projects.

We would be happy to provide further comment on this inquiry; for further information about our submission please contact me on 03 8662 3327.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Heather Gridley', with a stylized, cursive script.

Heather Gridley FAPS
Manager, Public Interest

About the APS

The APS is the premier professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 21,000 members. Psychology is a discipline that systematically addresses the many facets of human experience and functioning at individual, family and societal levels. The APS has a Climate Change and Environmental Threats Reference Group (CCRG) comprised of psychological experts in environmental and social psychology. Our members have expertise in resilience, the built environment, conservation of wilderness heritage areas, the influence of the environment on individual and community wellbeing, media representations of environmental threats, behaviour change, adaptation, preparedness, and risk perceptions, amongst other interests.

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Authorship.

This submission was written by Dr Susie Burke with expert input from members of the APS Climate Change and Other Environmental Threats Reference Group, in particular Professor Helen Ross and Dr Ann Sanson.