

National Parks development update

by Keith Muir

This spring the NSW Government will seek major changes to National Park and Wilderness laws which would, if passed unamended through Parliament, greatly increase privately funded development in our national parks.

Environment Minister, Carmel Tebbutt, has already initiated cultural change within the NPWS, and park staff and resources have been diverted from their conservation role to managing tourism.

These administrative and proposed legal changes put in motion the Taskforce on Tourism and National Parks' recommendations, which were adopted by Government in December 2008. The easing of lease conditions for private accommodation; establishment of 'investor ready' development sites; and commercial use in declared wilderness are just some the report's key recommendations.

Eleven of the report's twenty recommendations are for increased development and easier commercial access to national parks. Under the changes, the requirement that a private lease be for the purposes set out in a Plan of Management may no longer apply.

Under this 'regime change' it is very likely that the citizen-based national park advisory committee system will become as heavily infiltrated by the tourism industry as local councils are now with real estate agents. In fact, members of the tourism industry are being encouraged to join these committees through a tourism newsletter prepared by the Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC).

One conservation finding from the Tourism Taskforce report worth noting is that sustainable nature tourism can only be successful for reserves established under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, if the conservation values are maintained or enhanced by the activities undertaken. It is telling that this finding is not addressed by any of the report's twenty recommendations. More evidence of bias comes from the Managing for Sustainability section of the report, which is less than a page in length and also generates no recommendations. Clearly, the political priorities of the Government's Taskforce report are development, development and more development.

The NSW Government never consulted the public on any of these development initiatives which could drastically alter how our national parks and wilderness areas are managed.

The Government has further expedited administrative change by the appointment of a tourism consultant to DECC, who was responsible in 2008 for Kakadu's tourism development plans which cover part of that park's former wilderness zone. This consultant has been commissioned to identify new tourism products; develop a tourism framework; provide assistance to the Minister and develop partnerships, with the Tourism and Transport Forum and others.

A departmental restructure has raised the status of tourism, with a new branch, called Tourism and Partnerships, one of four key elements of the National Parks bureaucracy. The National Parks Service last year developed a Tourism Plan. This policy also proposes removal of planning impediments to facilitate the provision of visitor opportunities and increase partnership opportunities with the private sector.

All this adds up to a 'tidal wave' of pressure on park managers to get into bed with resort developers and on bureaucrats to expedite the removal of precious 'green tape' that currently protects our national parks.

Park developments

Several development proposals are already emerging under the new Parks' regime.

Four separate accommodation developments have been proposed for national parks in the Far South Coast's Tourism Master Plan. The DECC played a prominent role on the steering committee that commissioned the report. Accommodation development is also being mooted for Kosciuszko's back country as part of its National Landscape Tourism Master Plan, on top of the 800 bed Perisher development, only just approved.

On the mid-north coast at Trial Bay, a dozen holiday cabins are proposed behind the foredune in Arakoon State Conservation Area. Nationals leader Andrew Stoner has described this as a "crazy" tourism proposal that showed the Rees Government had its priorities all wrong. "Instead of focusing on protecting the unique coastal environment at South West Rocks, the Wildlife Service has been directed to become a revenue-raising venture," Mr Stoner said.

Meanwhile, the economic viability of such seaside resorts in national parks must be questioned by the Murramarang resort recently going broke. This resort, in the national park of the same name, went into receivership in May when the owners were unable to meet debt obligations.

It is also a fact that not one resort provides a significant net revenue contribution to any Australian national park, which draws into question why any Government would permit national park development. And the flipside, the cost to park management, is just being ignored, such as the \$4.8 million to be spent on infrastructure in the heavily developed Kosciuszko National Park this financial year.

Naturally the benefits from high-yield park tourism developments mainly flow to resort owners, as the cash flows away from local communities.

Even the owner of Trial Bay Eco Tourist Park, Tony Mayne, believes his eco-resort would be "cannibalised" by building resorts in the nearby park. For a cabin development to spoil the most beautiful part of a coastal park and destroy a nearby resort owner's profits on private land is, as Mr Stoner says, a "crazy" idea.

And while the exact nature of the Government's legislative changes are yet to be seen, the legislation is based on this totally false premise that privately funded high-end facilities will increase park visitation. All such development would do is pick the eyes out of our best loved parks and provide a fast buck to the white shoe brigade. The great bulk of park visitors have modest means and the potential contribution of 'high yield' resort visitors to grow park visitation is inconsequential.

Existing facilities in national parks already provide a massive economic return and will deliver significant increases in both visitation and park revenue. The June state budget papers reveal that National Parks will have 38 million visitors next year, up from 22.2 million visitors this year (which was found to be a gross underestimate).

The marketing focus for national parks should ensure that the latent potential of the \$1 billion worth of existing good quality, basic visitor facilities is better packaged, presented and promoted.

The National Parks and Wildlife Act should not be changed, as national parks and wilderness areas need to be strongly protected from developer pressure and the real impacts of development.

Built accommodation and other high impact services are best located in adjacent lands and towns, where they can be provided at less cost and have the greatest local benefit. The massive investment in existing park visitor infrastructure should also be maintained and improved.

The Government's plans are clearly fundamentally flawed and fail to support their conservation rhetoric. Conservation values cannot be protected (let alone enhanced) under a regime of increased private tourism development within national parks, which will result in progressive deterioration of the park system over time due to the neglect of conservation priorities.