

Selling out National Parks

KEITH MUIR

ROBIN Mosman, of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society warned *"parks are constantly under pressure from commercial interests, and it is only the democratic weight of public opinion and strength of the environment movement that will preserve them for the people of NSW, to whom they really belong."* This was back in 2004. Back then Robin was crucial in settling a peace deal, brokered by the then Minister for the Environment, Bob Debus, between the film industry and environment groups. But what followed was special legislation, literally called the Film Approval Act, that merely required Ministerial consideration of threatened species and 'minimised' park impacts.

Last month another deal was broken and now further legislation requires the Minister for the Environment to have a *presumption of approval* for any filming in national parks.

Hollywood's dollars have dazzled our politicians senseless. This inverted sort of approval process is a direct attack on the nature conservation purpose of national parks.

The new rules make it virtually impossible for the Environment Minister to refuse

a filming proposal in a national park. Big film outfits are very pushy and not interested in the finer details of park management. Large budget productions that want shots of their lead stars from certain angles are not concerned about national parks. So what next?

Further Trouble

The Iemma Government has been prepared to trade its green and social justice credentials for development opportunities. Planning, development control and the community rights of appeal to the Land and Environment Court have already been thrown overboard; being blamed for slowing the ship of state.

The government now has plans to boost tourism in parks. In relation to wilderness areas, the *Herald* (11 June, 08) reported that the philosophy of leaving as little footprint as possible for the tourism industry is at odds with tourism development. A tourist report from the chairman of Events NSW, John O'Neil, and commissioned by the Premier, Morris Iemma, recommends that national parks should 'sustain and enhance assets instead of focusing on protecting them from people'. And Verity Firth also has a ten point plan that includes removal planning impediments in parks that limit

tourism growth.

Nor will it be helpful that former national parks chief, Brian Gilligan, has been appointed to boost park visitation, as Gilligan has always pushed for the parks service to be less risk averse when considering tourism. The current executive director of national parks, Sally Barnes, was hand picked for her support of tourism development. All this adds up to trouble for wilderness and national parks.

It can be expected that legislation will be proposed within months to weaken park plans of management, facilitate park infrastructure development and give commercial tourism access to wilderness areas.

NSW parks receive over 20 million visits a year, compared with the very heavily promoted parks in the Northern Territory that receive only a little over a million visitors a year. The obvious conclusion is that park visitation can thrive without heavy promotion or diversion of scarce funding. The industry is on the wrong tack.

A visitor management strategy that provides adequate opportunities for quiet enjoyment and ensures the preservation of aesthetic and natural values has five principles:

- All activities governed by

the plan of management;

- No visitor accommodation on-park;
- The majority of each park should be subject to wilderness-style management, with suitable areas on the edges set aside for motor vehicles;
- Vehicle access should be on formed 2WD roads approved for use by the plan of management; and
- Low key facilities such as picnic tables and basic camping grounds should be located near park boundaries.

Limited high quality road assess on the edges of parks and good-quality low key facilities are the key to appropriate visitor management. Almost all heavily used park areas are within an hours walking distance of a vehicle access point. There are some exceptions to the above rule, such as the very attractive Main Range in Kosciuszko National Park and most scenic parts of the Budawang National Park, but they are few.

This does not suit those who would like to profit from parks and the Iemma Government is capable of selling parks out. A big fight is brewing and the government will soon have to decide whether it can afford to lose what little remains of their green credentials. Park management issues just stopped being boring, and are about to move centre stage.