

Don't Sell Our Parks to cut Your Deficit

by Keith Muir

Citizens have every right to get really hot under the collar about the NSW Government's plans to develop national parks. Our national parks, the public's Crown jewels, should never be sold.

Nothing should give us more pride than standing on a wild and lonely South Coast beach or a breathtaking Mountains lookout knowing such untouched, publicly owned bushland is permanently protected in our national parks.

It may be understandable that in these rocky economic times, the Parks and Wildlife Group (formerly the NPWS) tried to cut its costs and accommodate staff wage increases with tough measures to curb fiscal blowout. The recent Parks and Wildlife restructure, which removed some of the most experienced middle management, is due to this efficiency push.

It is also understandable that developers in this economic climate might suggest to a 'fiscally challenged' Government that its contracting tax base can be supplemented by skimming off revenue from the development of new park visitor services. So it might just make sense to expand the budget of the Tourism and Partnerships Branch, for more staff and to commission expensive consultancies to implement a raft of park development schemes.

The promise of revenue from park development is, however, just developer PR spin. The sad reality is that Environment Minister Frank Sartor and his park bureaucrats are planning to develop our parks in a vain hope that it will cover or at least distract attention from their growing deficit.

The NPWS Strategic Plan

The Tourism and Partnerships Branch has commissioned a consultant to prepare a national park Tourism Strategy. A draft of the Strategy report has been obtained by the Colong Foundation under Freedom of Information laws.

The report reveals some very flawed thinking. Its garbled 'infospeak' is scary. Here's a small sample: "a variety of experiences at a range of different price points needs to be offered. This will provide one base from which marketing activities of parks can become relevant to a cross section of the segments, with the creation of a broader constituency through attracting new visitors to parks." Did you get that?

Here's a rough translation: In order to strip park visitors of their money, services must be provided. Many saleable and bookable facilities must be built to successfully market national parks through the usual advertising outlets. These market mechanisms are a way of giving parks a money value that everyone can understand and respond to. A wide range of park developments will ensure as many people as possible can consume what was once conserved in national parks.

This process is called "Monetising the Brand," and in this case it also will liquidate your grandchildren's birthright to pristine nature. The downside of the market approach is that national parks must be chopped up into bite-sized sellable commodities. Do you want to kiss wilderness goodbye, simply because it's a non-market nature-focused park management strategy? I sure don't!

On top of this, the consultant's Tourism Strategy is for throwing parks open to festivals, concerts and adventure challenges, as these events draw crowds of money spinning tourists. There is also a plan to boost national park access for every user interest group –horse riding, mountain biking and so on – activities proven to cause damage to national parks.

When the report states "A strategic approach to the delivery of a range of high-quality accommodation to match a range of market needs across the state will achieve social,

economic and environmental benefits,” we have to ask, for whom? And how on earth could environmental benefits result from building in a park?

Developments mooted

The report mentions specific accommodation proposals for the Minnamurra rainforest, Bungonia Gorge, Green Cape lighthouse, Greycliffe House and Gap Bluff. A commercial hut experience is proposed for the Main Range in Kosciuszko National Park and along the coast in Ku-ring-gai National Park with water-based access. The proposal for a “Govetts’ Leap Sunset Restaurant”, at Blackheath would really draw political heat, especially as the sun sets in the west and Govetts Leap faces north.

Prof Ralf Buckley of the International Centre for Ecotourism Research at Griffith University said that “Proposals for upmarket exclusive tourist accommodation within NSW national parks do not fit any of the successful models. The closest analogues are historic hotels in US national parks, and recent lodges in South African national parks, and neither of these have made net contributions to conservation or park budgets.

“Examples from many other countries and other states, however, show that fixed-state private tourism developments within public protected areas do not provide either funding or political support for the parks agencies, and bring significant social, economic and environmental risks and costs.

“Parks are indeed a major attraction for tourists, both domestic and international, but the maximum contribution to regional economies is achieved by keeping the parks as natural as possible. Low key public visitor infrastructure adds value to the experience but commercial tourism infrastructure, activities and accommodation should be kept outside park boundaries” (4 March, 2009).

Sure, picking the eyes out of national parks will make money for developers but it won’t cut the National Parks and Wildlife deficit, as the profits won’t flow their way. Visitors to remote resorts spend their money on-resort and not in the community. So what’s bad for parks and rural towns will be good for developer profits. The Tourism and Transport Forum is a big donor to political parties, and that is why state and federal governments support park development.