I would also like to acknowledge traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and their elders past and present.

Peter Prineas this morning said the issue is not about tourism in national parks, it’s about tourism development in national parks. I don’t agree. There are much bigger questions than just developments in parks.

Protected areas have never been so important - firstly in conserving biodiversity - which is disappearing at an increasingly alarming rate, including inside national parks.

They have never been so important in providing essential ecological services - water, clean air, catchment protection, natural carbon stores, natural buffers against natural disasters.

They have never been so important in providing for current and future generations, places for learning, physical and spiritual replenishment, and experiencing the wonder, power and fragility of nature.

But protected areas have never faced such great challenges:
- funding;
- people with the skills and capacity to manage the growing diversity of issues;
- declining support and visitation which of course translates fairly directly into social and political support;
- growing alienation of youth and populations more generally from nature through urbanisation, technology and the allure of competing, easy and socially attractive alternative uses of time;
- from illegal activities such as logging, poaching, land clearing;
- and of course from invasive species and climate change.

The challenge in front of us is actually about society - our societies - and in particular decision-makers and opinion leaders, understanding and appreciating how vital a functioning natural world is to our economy, to their own wellbeing, and to that of future generations. And of course ultimately the challenge for all of us, or enough of us, is behaving and acting to conserve enough of the remaining natural world and its effective functioning to secure the future of life on this wonderful planet.

This is not just about wilderness or tourism developments. It’s about nature and human contact and interaction with nature. It’s a battle for the hearts and minds of this and future generations.

This is a hot topic for park agencies worldwide.
What are we doing about this?

We are actively collaborating and sharing our thinking, lessons, failures and successes, and innovations between park agencies. We have some key areas of focus.

Firstly on health and well being.

Contact and interaction with nature has well-established physical and mental health benefits.

Reaching deeper into communities, particularly younger generations, to get a greater cross section of society to engage with, experience and value parks has a range of environmental, social and economic benefits.

We are collaborating with interested segments of the health sector to build the evidence base. Some of you may have participated in the Healthy Parks Healthy People conference a couple of years ago in Melbourne - a brilliant initiative and of growing international interest and application.

Secondly we are working on the economic arguments - both direct and indirect benefits to regional and national economies from the expenditure by park agencies, and from the associated visitor economy that is based on visitation to parks. Increasingly there is work on the economic value of ecosystem services, still largely unpriced and therefore undervalued. The emerging carbon economy is also an area of great potential and interest.

And thirdly we are beginning to look at social issues - how different parts of society, for example from different cultural backgrounds, use and view parks. How can we realign what we do to attract more diverse visitors, and educate them, or at least give them a taste for the natural world? How can we bring more families into parks? Early experiences after all are a critical influence on future behaviour and activity.

So to tourism, or more importantly to visitors – who are the ones who get the direct engagement in and with nature, and of course nature as experienced through protected areas.

In common with most park agencies globally we are keen to reverse a widespread and chronic decline in visitation and to do so, we need to reach out to much newer and wider audiences.

As a park agency with the mission 'the conservation and appreciation of Commonwealth reserves' Parks Australia has, among its priorities, a major focus on visitors and the visitor experience. This led us, among other reasons, to develop the National Landscapes partnership with Tourism Australia.

We approached Tourism Australia over six years ago, in part to try to defuse an unproductive public contest between conservation and tourism, and to enlist the tourism sector to support parks rather than criticise their management and managers.

Nature after all is the primary, and consistent, compelling factor attracting visitors to Australia across all our primary international visitor markets.
We began to learn the language of tourism; we adopted Tourism Australia’s target market - the experience seeker. We discovered that this market segment represents, in many respects, the ideal park visitor.

We set out to articulate and elaborate the argument that nature-based tourism depends on natural assets, and therefore for self-interest, the tourism sector should support measures that protect this asset base.

We also took a landscape approach, in part, as we say, to make Australia digestible to the international visitor. With some 10000 protected areas, our national park system (I use the term loosely) doesn't provide a particularly useful guide to the best, most unique and characteristically Australian nature-based experiences.

So we suggested aggregating these up, into large regional landscapes. A deliberate element of this approach was to aim to attract visitors to, and disperse them across, a broad region, using the key iconic parks to craft the key messages about these regions and the experiences they offered, but not so much that the parks had to become the sole focus of visitation or developments, such as accommodation and other hard infrastructure.

A key criterion was engagement in what became the National Landscape program, was to build and sustain a broad constituency of support - including park and tourism agencies, at state and regional levels, local governments, conservation groups, tourism operators, local business, development corporations etc.

One of the exciting achievements of the program for me, has been the feedback from many participants to the effect that this is the first time they have all been in the same room together talking about what makes their region special, what it is about their environment that attracts visitors, and what they need to do, not only to attract more people to stay longer, but to also protect what they have because they better appreciate what a unique offering they have.

I want to turn briefly to what is happening in the states and territories. There is no doubt that protected areas everywhere are under increasing pressure – from human use, invasive species, and climate change.

Clearly there are some important issues being aired, such are what are appropriate uses of areas that are primarily managed for biodiversity conservation.

The most prominent political discourse now not so much around setting aside more areas for conservation, but the uses of the existing conservation estate.

I don't think this is a bad thing of itself, however it does require intelligent engagement in these debates.

These issues provide an opportunity for articulating the case for why these areas have been set aside, why conservation is important, and how the increasingly complex task of managing these areas should be best achieved.

It's imperative that we improve public awareness and understanding that all of our futures depend on nature and, increasingly, on how well we manage this responsibility. We must
however build the constituency of support for conservation through practical experience. The tourism sector is a critical first port of call.

We must look to how public discourse is conducted and the media through which influenced is generated and noticed.

I have been intrigued by the super trawler issue, and the critical role played by social media in generating outrage and political response. This is an important pointer to the future.

However unless campaigns like these are, at their heart, motivated by a widely held emotional connection to the issue involved, and in particular to personal experience with and love of nature, I suspect they may be ephemeral and ineffective in redirecting and sustaining public, and private, investment in protecting nature.

Thank you.