Conference Overview

by Ian Brown, Conference Director

Over a weekend in September a wide range of speakers explored aspects of the conference theme: Wilderness, tourism and national parks: taking stock and looking ahead. Generations of conservationists and park managers have grappled with balancing conservation and recreation in protected areas. Two things everybody seems to be able to agree on is that nature-based recreation is an important function of protected areas and that it can help to build connection with the natural world and support for conservation.

Beyond those ‘motherhoods’ lies a great divergence of ways and means, which came to a head in NSW in 2010 when powerful industry lobby group the Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF) succeeded in its push for government to loosen the legislative bonds around private development in national parks – despite the best efforts of environment groups. This push has now succeeded in most Australian states.

However the TTF represents only the ‘big end of town’, the land developers and resort operators, not the vast diversity of nature-based recreation and the nature tourism industry. The underlying purpose of the conference was to examine the nuances of how ‘tourism’ (in its broadest sense, and consistent with ‘visitor use’) should fit into protected areas. Hopefully this would arm conservationists with a better understanding of the issues and how best to deal with them.

Dr Les Molloy outlined the history and current challenges of the New Zealand park system, highlighting some differences with Australia. Peter Prineas argued against private development in national parks, saying that it always ended up being subsidised, while Dr Terry De Lacy stressed the importance of the tourism industry as an ally, especially in the developing world. Also from academia, Dr Brendan Mackey presented the case for wilderness quality being real and measurable, and Dr Catherine Pickering put forward techniques for rapidly assessing recreational impacts.

Dr Haydn Washington said that our anthropocentric and ‘resourcist’ world views are the key problem in all environmental conflict. An ecologically sustainable future depends on the adoption of ecocentric perspectives that recognise intrinsic value in nature. Phil Ingamells described the problems with national park planning in Victoria. Kym Cheatham (Ecotourism Australia) stressed that the tourists are still coming, motivated predominantly by nature, and we need to give them the best experiences – assisted by rigorous ecotourism certification.

Peter Cochrane (Parks Australia) was an enthusiast for the National Landscapes program and how it was building a strong alliance with tourism. Bob Conroy (NSW NPWS) outlined government plans for various new recreational developments in parks, industry partnerships and a revamped website, all aimed at re-asserting the value of parks to a changing community. Finally, ENGO speakers from around the country described what’s been happening in their regions, and suggested some ways forward.

The discussions and workshop session drew some key threads and meanings from this diverse material. There was strong endorsement of more advocacy to re-assert the conservation values of parks, and the need to strengthen park planning and engagement across tourism and the broadest constituency - well-established and robust methods that tend to get overlooked when moneyed
interests and governments intervene. Regional, cross-tenure recreation planning also got a lot of support, so parks don’t have to carry too much of the recreational load. The National Landscapes are one example, but perhaps marred by a narrow focus and power imbalances.

The 70-odd participants were a well-informed and enthusiastic bunch that engaged speakers with cogent questions and comments. Most were from the environment sector, and from NSW, and we failed to attract a good number of industry and government folk.

For the environment movement, the conference provided plenty of food for thought and a platform to develop a stronger and more focused position on tourism in protected areas. Whether this happens when the environment is besieged on all fronts, many of them arguably more threatening than tourism, remains to be seen.

But it could be considered that the dangers we face are all connected. Speakers from all sides noted that national parks and wilderness are more important now than ever before, and yet are also more threatened than ever. We are seeing a renewed assault on our wild places. If forests are to be open-cut, and fancy resorts and hunting allowed in national parks, then this points to a new materialism and a lack of community connection with nature and respect for wild places. The environment movement needs to consider how it responds to this challenge, and what role human activity in national parks and wilderness will play.