ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the Traditional Owners and Elders, past, present and future, of the land on which we meet the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

I would also like to acknowledge and sincerely thank the many groups represented at this conference who have worked tirelessly over many, many years to lobby and provide support for our wonderful system of parks and reserves and wilderness areas in NSW.

I would also like to thank the conference organisers for offering me the opportunity to talk to you today and to open the second day of this conference.

The theme of the conference, ‘Wilderness, tourism and national parks: taking stock and looking ahead’, resonates with our vision for our national parks – that by engaging with those across the full spectrum of park users we will be in the best possible position to create meaningful, memorable experiences that will ensure greater connection between people and our wonderful parks and natural spaces and help build a stronger constituency for conservation..

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM IN NATURE

With more than 860 parks and reserves in NSW sampling a range of ecosystems including subtropical, warm and cool temperate rainforests tall open forests, mallee, myall and brigalow woodlands, grasslands, coastal heath and wetlands and iconic river red gum forests, the opportunities for nature-based visitation to parks, both for recreation and tourism, are both diverse and extensive.

Around 9% of NSW is protected through the extensive network of national parks and reserves, including more than 40% of the state’s coastline. These areas provide visitors with a range of activities from bushwalking, picnicking, touring, kayaking, horse-riding and camping to more adventurous outdoor pursuits like mountain bike riding, abseiling and canyoning.

Nearly 2 million hectares have now been declared as wilderness in NSW, there are 51 wilderness areas within 44 parks and reserves representing nearly 30% of the total protected area system. These wilderness areas represent a broad range of environments including Mutawintji NP in the far west, the Snowy Mountains and Nandewar Ranges, the Great Dividing Range and the coast and its hinterland. There are also 6 declared wild rivers in NSW representing more than 10,000kms of waterways which together with wilderness areas provide opportunities for solitude and self-reliant recreation.

As mentioned earlier this wonderful system of parks, reserves and wilderness areas would not exist without the passion and commitment of many visionary people over the last 150 years including people like Miles and Milo Dunphy, Allen Strom, Eccleston Du Faur, Marie Byles, Paddy Pallin and conservation groups such as the NCC, NPA, the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife and the Colong Foundation for Wilderness and this needs to be duly acknowledged.

The NSW parks system receives nearly 35 million domestic visits each year, and nearly 3 million international visitors to the state incorporate a visit to a protected area while they are here.
Our research tells us people are motivated to participate in outdoor recreation for many reasons, such as health and fitness, or the chance to escape, to socialise, to do something different, challenging or fun. Sometimes it’s simply being able to appreciate the beauty of natural settings.

This diversity within protected areas means they also play an important role in supporting regional tourism, and in turn contributing to local economies across NSW and the delivery of the Government’s NSW 2021 targets for encouraging more people to participate in recreational activities. The National Park system has long invested in visitor facilities, with more than:

- 660 lookouts;
- 750 picnic sites;
- 2,500km of walking tracks;
- 470 campgrounds;
- 70 short term holiday accommodation buildings and
- about $74 million annual expenditure on park infrastructure and visitor facilities to name but a few features.

A key challenge for protected area managers, and we are not alone in this, is ensuring the planning process for visitor facilities is both robust and sustainable and that visitation does not incrementally degrade the important values that exist within the park.

There is no denying that nature-based tourism is considered to have the greatest potential to assist growth in domestic and international tourism in Australia. 3 in 5 international visitors participate in nature based tourism and in 2010 international visitors spent $14.6 billion in NSW.

There is clear research that shows our national parks provide a wide range of inspiring experiences that appeal to domestic and international tourists alike.

In considering a key theme of this conference, responding to the demand for more access and development of national parks - it is important to consider what makes a good outdoor recreation experience?

**BENEFITS OF RECREATION IN NATURE**

Being in nature is good for you. More and more research is telling us that access to nature and parks plays a vital role in our health and wellbeing. More than that, contact with nature has been shown to boost immunity to disease, enhance our concentration and productivity, and promote healing.

There is evidence that nature has positive effects on blood pressure, cholesterol, outlook on life and stress levels. It provides people with an opportunity to unwind from the day to day stresses of contemporary living.

For children in particular, nature engagement and play can help with cognitive development, and aid in the prevention of issues that are on the rise such as childhood obesity, diabetes and depression.

Our parks offer a critical setting for the promotion of healthy lifestyles and the creation of wellbeing. Outdoor recreation in our parks plays an invaluable role in helping people to access nature – and these health benefits – in a safe and sustainable way. It also helps visitors to appreciate, understand and enjoy our parks.

Through fostering appreciation, we can encourage a sense of connection to nature, and long-term support for our parks to ensure they remain relevant and protected for this and future generations to experience and enjoy.
The challenge and opportunity is to ensure that in creating memorable and meaningful nature-based experiences, we continue to ensure the conservation of our natural and cultural heritage while supporting sustainability in the recreation and tourism industry.

WE HAVE A NEW APPROACH

We’re leading the way in balancing the conservation of our natural assets, with new and engaging ways to attract and welcome visitors to our parks for recreation and enjoyment. This approach applies to all visitors, be they there as a family, tourists visiting friends and family or participating in a commercial tour. Our approach is to

- Address both supply and demand;
- Develop new and revitalise existing experiences;
- Implement considered marketing to reach visitors through the right channels and with the right messages;
- Strengthen our partnerships with both industry and other government agencies and land managers to deliver cross tenure experiences; and
- Introduce new vigour in the business feasibility and revenue we attribute to on-park activities.

Our track record in recent years demonstrates our commitment to this new approach. It’s also testament to the strong partnerships we have developed with the outdoor recreation industry for the development and delivery of quality nature-based experiences.

There’s a lot happening across the state. We’re working hard to improve sustainable access to our national parks – for example through our new strategies for Sustainable Mountain Biking and horse riding, and a range of new and exciting experiences in our National Landscapes and Riverina regions.

A NEW STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE MOUNTAIN BIKING

In October last year, Minister Parker launched the NPWS Sustainable Mountain Biking Strategy following extensive consultation with a wide range of community, industry and government stakeholders. The Strategy balances the need to provide for this increasingly popular and healthy recreational activity and continuing to protect our national parks.

It helps guide the provision of high quality mountain biking experiences that riders of all experience levels can enjoy, while ensuring they are provided where it is appropriate and safe. The Strategy outlines what planning requirements are needed for any new trails and specifies track design requirements.

It also encourages continued partnerships between the NSW Government and mountain biking groups to improve and maintain mountain biking tracks and adopts a code of conduct so all visitors can enjoy their time in our parks.

We’re working with other land managers and local communities to identify future opportunities in the most appropriate sites and create linkages between existing trails that improve the diversity of the offer, quality of the ride and sustainability of the track.

In addition to the opening of a new network of dedicated mountain biking tracks in Glenrock State Conservation Area near Newcastle last October, work is already underway on a number of priority projects, including:

- A new cross-country loop track in the Murray Valley Regional and National Parks – to be completed by the end of June 2013;

- A new multi-use loop track in Livingstone National Park, which officially opened on 14 September 2012;
A new shared mountain bike and walking track linking Thredbo Resort, Perisher Ski Tube and Lake Crackenback Resort in Kosciuszko National Park – this is already partially open and will be fully completed by end June 2015; and

- Enhancement of the Woodford-Oaks mountain bike single track in the Blue Mountains National Park, which will be completed by the end of 2014.

Planning is also well underway for:

- A new mountain bike track system in a national park in Northern Sydney; and

- Enhancement of mountain bike tracks in Yellomundee Regional Park, an important recreational facility for Western Sydney.

We’re also creating opportunities for the community to participate or try out cycling in our national parks. Last October, we hosted community cycling events in 13 parks, including mountain bike competitions, cycling tours, family cycling days and volunteer maintenance open days. We’re planning to do the same again this year, with a further series of community events in parks across the State in October.

A NEW STRATEGY FOR HORSE RIDING

We’re currently developing a set of Strategic Directions for Horse Riding in NSW National Parks and Reserves, to guide the identification and development of new horse riding opportunities in our parks in the years ahead.

The Strategic Directions have been developed in consultation with peak horse riding bodies and the NPW Advisory Council. They balance the provision of new horse riding opportunities with ensuring park values are protected. They identify ‘priority regions’ in NSW that will be the key focus of new horse riding opportunities.

They also outline a process for working with local horse riders to provide improved and sustainable horse riding experiences in these regions. The Strategic Directions also propose the establishment of a wilderness pilot, to trial horse riding for a three year period. The pilot program will be managed through a best practice, adaptive management strategy.

A final version of the Strategic Directions will be released later this year.

NEW RECREATION EXPERIENCES IN OUR NATIONAL LANDSCAPES

NSW is home to more National Landscapes than any other state in Australia – spanning the spectacular natural environments of coast, bush, alpine and rainforest:

- Australia’s Coastal Wilderness
- Blue Mountains
- Australian Alps and
- Green Cauldron.

We’re also in the process of adding another magnificent landscape to the portfolio, with a National Landscape focused on the natural wonders of Sydney Harbour and surrounds expected to be officially announced later this year.

Each of our National Landscapes offers a special opportunity to identify, implement and promote new and exciting recreation experiences in partnership with other land managers and the recreation and tourism industries.
In the Australian Alps, we’re working with Destination NSW, Forests NSW, Catchments and Lands and NSW Fisheries, to position the Snowy Mountains region as a recreation hub and peak destination for experiences such as hiking, horse-riding, mountain biking, kayaking, canoeing, fishing, skiing and special events. The project aligns with the Australian Alps National Landscape positioning of “Challenge” and identifies opportunities for cross-tenure cooperation.

In Australia’s Coastal Wilderness on the far south coast of NSW, we’re working with the private sector to develop a truly world-class nature and cultural experience along the spectacular, 30-kilometre, multi-day Light to Light Walk in Ben Boyd National Park. It includes guided experiences with low impact accommodation facilities along this magnificent coastal walk, as well as the adaptive reuse of the heritage-listed lighthouse station buildings.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN OUR RIVER RED GUM REGIONS

We’re also working on new and exciting recreation opportunities in our magnificent River Red Gum settings of the Riverina and Murray, where 100,000 hectares of River Red Gum reserves have been set aside for protection and the enjoyment of locals and visitors.

Earlier this year, a Nature Tourism Action Plan was launched for the region – a significant achievement following extensive consultation with local government, regional tourism stakeholders and the communities of the Riverina.

The Plan identifies a range of opportunities for people to access and enjoy the magnificent forests, rivers and wetlands of the area.

The Government has committed more than $2 million in funding this financial year for the planning and development of tourism and visitor projects such as:

- a multi-day adventure trail including kayaking, mountain biking and bush walking;
- investigating a high ropes tree top adventure park;
- a cross-border canoe trail of the Murray, and kayak and canoe tours of the Murrumbidgee River and Yanga Lake wetland;
- feasibility of an Eco Lodge to be operated under a lease arrangement;
- revitalisation of existing picnic grounds, boat access areas, and camping grounds and walking tracks within each of the visitor nodes.

This year we licensed the first tour operator for this region, Riverina Experience, and positive media has helped promote this fledgling business which is delivering activities consistent with the Nature Tourism Action Plan.

Projects such as these will help to ensure these magnificent forests remain a productive part of the local economy while also conserving them for the enjoyment of future generations.

CONNECTING VIA THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE

In developing new initiatives and experiences for nature-based recreation, we’re also re-shaping the way we communicate with our visitors. We’re turning digital technology to our advantage with exciting and innovative new approaches to the promotion of our natural and cultural heritage, and the benefits of nature for recreation and healthy lifestyles.
We’ve recently launched two key initiatives in the digital space: a children’s program called WilderQuest, and a new visitor website.

WILDERQUEST

We’re laying the foundations early for healthy lifestyles and a life-long conversation with nature. In August this year, NPWS hosted international expert and speaker on the connections between people and nature, Richard Louv.

Louv’s research identifies the critical role that nature plays in our overall health and wellbeing; he points to correlations between rising rates of poor health in children with what he coins as ‘nature-deficit disorder’.

Louv’s work was one of the driving forces behind our exciting children’s program, WilderQuest, launched in April this year by the Minister.

WilderQuest uses the latest technologies to encourage children to learn through play, and inspire them and their families to get out and experience nature in a fun and safe way, providing a first step into nature for many. It does this through integrating a feature-rich, interactive website and an iPad app with real, in-nature experiences.

We recognise that if we are going to reach the children of today and capture their attention, we need to do so using the technology that they like and use daily. Many of you will remember the impact of Skippy on inspiring a love for the Australia bush and its wildlife. We hope that Ranger Sam and Pug will catch on just as well.

The website has already attracted more than 10,000 unique visits, while the WilderQuest app was named Apple iPad app of the Week in early April and has achieved a 4.5 out of 5 star rating.

It was also ranked at number 1 in the education category for iPad apps in Australia, was downloaded more than 11,000 times in the first two weeks since launch and continues to perform strongly.

The long-term aspiration of WilderQuest is to build life-long connections between people and nature, ultimately encouraging healthy, outdoor lifestyles, more time spent in nature and inspiring the next generation to pursue nature based careers.

A core element of the program is the delivery of special WilderQuest Discovery tours, which will be run in national parks during school holiday periods. These activities help to create an important link between the virtual and the real, and make nature experiences and recreation an easy choice for families.

We’ve also recently released WilderQuest Education, offering classroom resources for teachers, like smart board technology, linking NPWS Discovery for Schools activities to specifically developed WilderQuest’s online resources.

IMPROVING OUR PROMOTION OF PARKS AND EXPERIENCES ONLINE

We’re putting significant effort into improving the way we tell visitors about the sustainable recreation opportunities they can have in NSW’s national parks, and making it easier for them to access information about those experiences.

Roll-out of our new visitor-focused national parks website is well underway and delivers on the Government’s election commitment. Phase one launched in May and offers vastly improved
functionality, an inspirational new design, engaging new content, integrated social media, stunning images and video, and online booking technology.

This is an ongoing project; more great content and functionality will be coming online in carefully planned phases.

In phase two, we’ll be adding even more parks, bringing the total to 180, with more fantastic ‘see and do’ content, improved maps, and more links to commercial tour operators, opportunities to book accommodation and camping online. Phase two is due for delivery in December this year.

We’re also promoting the accommodation and experiences provided by our recreation and tourism partners. We’re working with them to help make their businesses a success while supporting regional economies.

Ultimately, we want people to know about the vast array of nature and cultural experiences on their doorstep, including our stunning wilderness areas and to encourage safe and healthy, outdoor lifestyles.

**WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH INDUSTRY**

We’re committed to working in partnership with local communities, recreation and tourism operators, and transport and accommodation providers to inspire and motivate people to visit our national parks.

And to encouraging growth and delivery of experiences in a sustainable way. Outdoor recreation activities take place in many national parks and wilderness areas across the state. There is great value in these natural spaces as places for recreation and diversity of experience and so they must be protected and respected.

We value the importance of recreation and adventure activities in our parks and wilderness areas, and the positive role recreation and tour operators play in ensuring that visitors have an inspiring, safe and enjoyable experience.

And we look to high operating standards – delivered through our Parks Eco Pass licensing system and through the standards, guidelines and accreditations developed by and for the industry – to protect both the environment and continued growth in the sector.

National Parks recognises there are great challenges in getting consistency and agreement in the development of these guidelines, but we do believe these standards play a role in the delivery of outdoor adventure activities such as abseiling, kayaking and mountain biking.

**NPWS’ PARKS ECO PASS**

There are currently about 180 licensed recreation and tour operators taking visitors into parks to participate in a wide range of activities from bushwalking, abseiling, cycling, surfing and kayaking to cultural, educational and eco tours.

In line with the Government’s commitment to reducing red tape for businesses seeking partnerships with us, we are currently developing a rapid assessment process for Parks Eco Pass licence applications for low-risk activities or locations.

There will be standard operating conditions and operators will be able to better engage with parks through an enhanced online environment.

There are still a number of sensitive environments or high-risk activities where a more rigorous assessment will continue to be necessary.
We aim to have the reforms complete by the end of this year, ready to roll out in the first half of 2013.

Park visitation including tourism is an embedded expectation into the future and is reflected across the spectrum of National Park’s operations.

Recently, the National Parks and Wildlife Act was amended to incorporate tourism and visitors, and give greater clarity in relation to private sector provision of experiences and facilities.

Increasing opportunities to visit and enjoy parks is a NPWS Strategic Goal, we have developed a Sustainable Tourism Action Plan and included specific consideration of visitation and experience development in Regional Operations Plans.

NPWS has a Tourism and Partnerships Branch and, most recently has established the Business Reform and Development Branch.

With so much going on it is appropriate to ask – what is being done to ensure the protection of the key element that makes our protected areas so special – the natural environment. How can we manage for both conservation and visitation?

**TOOLS FOR MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION OF PARKS**

A key question is what information do we need to manage for these outcomes, how do we use it and how does it influence our park planning. I would like to mention a few examples of the range of tools in place to ensure the long term protection of protected areas.

Plans of management are key statutory documents which among other things determine the provision of park use opportunities, including for wilderness areas. This is a statutory requirement. Currently 83% of the reserve system is currently covered by an exhibited and adopted plan of management.

Plans of management are guided by the provisions of the NPW Act and by a number of other planning and policy instruments including the NPWS Living Parks Strategy which is a framework for the management of sustainable and culturally appropriate visitation, by National Landscape strategies, horse riding and mountain biking strategies, and by state and regional tourism plans.

In addition, a State of the Parks survey is conducted every three years on all NPWS reserves. Visitation and the impact of visitation on park values is specifically considered. Through State of the Parks, park managers:

- Estimate visitor numbers
- Identify where visitor behaviours or numbers are threatening park values
- Assess the effectiveness of current visitor management in terms of meeting visitor expectations and impacts on park values.

State of the parks data is available to all NPWS staff and its information is a key contributor to the development and review of Branch Operations Plans, allocation of NPWS resources and budget and performance benchmarking over time.

NPWS has in place a range of corporate policies to further support the objective of Acts we administer. Included in this is the Policy for Commercial Recreation and Tourism in Wilderness.

This policy provides a tight framework of what commercial use of wilderness is appropriate including limiting group sized to a maximum of 15 and outlining how overnight experiences are to be managed in the form of camping or utilising existing buildings or structures.

Within this example, it is acknowledged that a one-size fits all set of rules is unable to accommodate differing levels of environmental sensitivity across landscapes and activities, and
specifically focuses on visitors associated with commercial tours who across all national parks and reserves represent less than 1% of total visitation.

On 14 February 2011 specific sustainability assessment criteria were adopted by NPWS for consideration in issuing leases or licences under Section 151B of the NPW Act.

These guidelines, which are available to the public on the OEH website, inform the assessment and decision making process and apply equally to proposals made by the public and those of a similar kind to be undertaken by NPWS.

These guidelines have been customised to further support those preparing sustainability assessments, and include various templates that reflect both the proposed scale of use and nature of the associated structures and facilities.

**CONCLUSION**

Visitors and tourists participating in outdoor recreation make an enormous contribution to the economic vibrancy of communities – it has transformed from an option to an essential through the delivery of undeniable economic, social and health benefits.

Protected areas play a cornerstone role in meeting the community’s desire for outdoor recreation through the provision of well maintained, well considered and engaging experiences - bringing communities and visitors into nature and natural spaces.

Maintaining the balance between access and conservation is undoubtedly a challenge. I’m not shying away from the fact that NPWS collects fees from some users and budgets for this. Revenue of over $27million was collected from park user fees in 2011-12, all of which is retained by NPWS for reinvestment in the protected area network.

Opportunities to generate revenue will continue to play an important role decision making, in particular as NSW moves to an environment of tighter financial constraints, and growing demands for resources across all agencies to deliver Government priorities.

Key priorities for NPWS are the delivery of the expectations of NSW 2021 through:
- continuing to contribute to economic outcomes for regional NSW
- being customer focused and involving communities in decision making
- reducing red tape and
- implementing the reform agenda as proposed by the Visitor Economy Taskforce

By working in partnership, the Government and the vast community of park users can continue to deliver motivating, meaningful experiences in our national parks, encouraging healthy lifestyles and life-long connections with nature and meeting the promise that protected areas will be preserved for the enjoyment of future generations.

Thank you.