Nature conservation and tourism development in our national parks

by Peter Prineas

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I would like to thank the conference organisers for the opportunity to participate in this debate and to speak for nature conservation.

The primary purpose of the national park system is nature conservation. A secondary purpose is to provide for recreation compatible with nature conservation.

Tourism development is the issue, not visitors

The first point I wish to make is that I do not see this as a debate about tourism in national parks versus nature conservation. It is about tourism development in national parks versus nature conservation. I want to argue for minimising development in national parks, not visitors.

Tourism developments in parks – do people want them?

Millions of people are visiting and enjoying NSW national parks and I do not believe there is a widespread demand or popular outcry for more tourism facilities to be built in our national parks. The situation was much the same in 2010 when a bill favouring tourism developments in national parks was rushed through the NSW Parliament.

A Roy Morgan survey commissioned by Parks and Wildlife in 2008 found that NSW national parks received about 38 million
domestic visits and 90% of visitors reported they were satisfied, and 57% very satisfied, with their experience.

A further survey in 2010 found that visits were lower at about 34.6 million but this was explained by factors such as weather (extremely wet weather was experienced throughout 2010). Visitor satisfaction levels in 2010 were not significantly different to 2008.

These survey results do not establish a serious decline in visitation to NSW national parks or that visitors are dissatisfied with their experiences.

Some minor sectional interests wish to see national park access widened to permit their favoured recreation. Legislation was recently passed by the NSW Parliament to give shooters access to many parks. This legislation was not the product of considered government policy but the result of a sordid political transaction. There is also a demand to open up wilderness areas to horse riding.

In the USA a ‘gateway’ development policy has been in effect for many years. This policy favours the location of park visitor accommodation and many other facilities in a gateway community on the national park approaches, rather than within the park. I recall that the National Parks Association of NSW took up this policy in the 1970s.

**Building and keeping a parks constituency**

There are suggestions that park agencies globally are dealing with a decline in visitation and are anxious about losing their constituency. I am not sure there is such a global decline.

If there was such a trend then it would be a concern. However, I do not believe that building more tourism infrastructure in parks is the appropriate response. Other approaches may be effective and should be explored. These might include better promotion, or
better linking of park visitation with off-park facilities and venues, or better transport, or providing a better experience or ‘product’.

Is more tourism development the answer to declining park finances?

Declining finances are a threat to national parks systems all over Australia. Governments are not adequately funding national parks. As a result, parks administrations are being forced to look to other sources of revenue. However, parks agencies have often not benefited from commercial concessions in their parks.

Professor Ralph Buckley, Director of the International Centre for Ecotourism research at Griffith University, in addressing a public meeting in 2010, observed that national park concession holders – with the possible exception of those leasing some heritage buildings such as lighthouses – do not meet all the costs they generate. He went so far as to say that private development in national parks “just does not work” and warned against national parks agencies giving away the profitable part of their business to private interests.

Professor Buckley also observed that in South Africa, where national park tourism is a large industry, 66% of national parks revenue comes from fees charged direct to visitors by the parks agency, with the commercial tourism operators contributing only 5%.

The most developed national park in NSW is Kosciuszko National Park (KNP). It accommodates the ski resorts. It has more beds than the town of Cooma. I have not seen any recent statement of KNP’s costs and revenues. However the situation would not have changed much from the 1990s when KNP was shown to be a drain on Parks and Wildlife finances.

You cannot develop a natural area without effecting natural
conditions and the KNP resorts are no exception. Among many impacts there has been a near loss of a Burramys population on the Perisher Range.

It is impossible to discuss Kosciuszko National Park in this context without mentioning the unusual development culture that exists there, and which I hope we will never see in other national parks. At KNP, leasehold apartments and villas within the ski resort areas are developed and sold to private buyers. In other words there is a real estate market. The parks agency has been trying for some years to interest a private developer in building a ‘village’ on the Perisher Resort car park. The development has been approved. It would cover an area equal to five football fields. There would be seven four-storey buildings with 239 apartments and associated retail, commercial and recreational facilities.

It should be noted that Parks and Wildlife has ceased to be the consent authority for development within Kosciuszko National Park resort areas; that role has gone over to the State’s planning agency.

If the aim is to magnify park management costs then intensive tourism development seems to be the way to go. The cheapest management option is usually wilderness.

**Tourism developments in NSW National Parks given greater scope**

The 2010 bill which brought in new arrangements for tourism developments in NSW national parks attracted criticism, and for good reasons.

The rationale for the Bill appeared to be based on two myths. One of these myths was that visitor numbers for NSW national parks were in serious decline. This has already been discussed.
Another myth was that the changes were needed to meet a target in the NSW State Plan which called for a 20% increase in visits to national parks by 2016. In fact the growth trend in visitation to NSW parks was sufficient to meet the 2016 target.

The 2008 O’Neil Report to the NSW Premier on the state of the tourism industry prepared the ground for the changes to the National Parks and Wildlife Act. It reported a decline in tourism in NSW, especially in regional areas. There was a decline, but the causes identified had little to do with national parks. The report grossly understated national park visitation at 22 million. It then went on to attack the management of national parks and wilderness areas in NSW. The criticisms seemed to rely more on ideology than analysis and were presented in general terms and mostly unsupported by examples or case studies. The Report argued for less regulation within the national park system.

Next we had the appointment of a Tourism Taskforce by the NSW Government. Senior people from environmental NGOs took part in this Taskforce and two NSW environment organisations were funded by the Government to the amount of $20,000 each to make their input to the Taskforce’s deliberations. I expressed my view at the time that this funding should not have been accepted. The Tourism Taskforce submitted a report that called for unspecified ‘clarification’ of the National Parks and Wildlife Act in relation to tourism developments.

Statements emanated at this time from NSW Parks and Wildlife about ‘realigning our business’ and making organisational changes to give greater emphasis to tourism development in parks.

The stage had been set some years before when the Australian Conservation Foundation and the IUCN signed up to a Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF) manifesto called 'National Parks & Tourism: A Natural Partnership’. The TTF is a tourism industry lobby. The TTF has worked its way around Australia's national parks agencies and has been able to move national parks policy to
a stance that is now more accepting of development.

The state and territory governments are being urged to compete with one another in opening up their national parks to tourism developments. This is evident from newspaper reports like this:

*Tasmania risks losing its grip on the wilderness tourism sector if it doesn’t make it easier to develop in national parks, says the Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania* – Hobart Mercury Aug 30, 2012

The 2010 legislative changes for tourism developments in NSW national parks

When the NSW national parks system was set up in 1967 the provisions concerned with visitor facilities consisted of three sections amounting to about 500 words. By 2010 there were 20 sections with over 5000 words.

The 2010 changes removed or weakened constraints on developments in national parks imposed by a long a line of court decisions and widened the discretion of the Minister in granting national park concessions.

The bill introduced a range of uses for new developments in parks that had formerly been limited to existing buildings and structures. These uses included research facilities, conference and function centres, recreational, educational and cultural activities, sporting activities and retail shops. Also, existing buildings in parks which were formerly able to be adapted for a limited range of uses could now be put to ‘any use’.

Another change was to broaden the purposes for which developments could be provided from developments for ‘visitors’ to developments for ‘visitors or tourists’ The addition of ‘tourists’ might not seem important but it has the potential to facilitate developments in parks that are larger in scale and offer a more
sophisticated and wider range of facilities than would be appropriate for a mere ‘visitor’.

The amendments also opened up wilderness areas to commercial operations. The NSW Wilderness Act was amended in order to effect this change.

A statutory duty to facilitate tourism in national parks was also introduced. This was achieved by amending the plan of management provisions so that Park managers are obliged to identify sites for tourism developments when formulating plans.

If the aim of the 2010 amendments was to assure greater scope and certainty to proponents of tourism developments in national parks, they would seem to have achieved their purpose. However this will only be known when the provisions have been in operation for some time and have been tested in the courts.

**National Parks – a democratic institution**

In closing I should mention the importance of national parks as a democratic institution. The parks are public lands and open to everyone. They are made accessible by roads, walking tracks, signage and camping areas and visitors are free to engage in recreation that is compatible with nature conservation and does not interfere with the enjoyment of others.

Regrettably, democracy in the parks is under threat as a result of legislative changes that could see desirable sites appropriated for the enjoyment of those willing and able to pay for the privilege.