



## **THE THREATS TO NATIONAL PARKS AND WILDERNESS OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT**

Tourism promotion, commercialisation of park management and accommodation of intrusive recreation are a slippery slope undermining the nature conservation purpose of national parks.

This paper examines the policy consequences of treating tourism as if it were essential to the survival of national parks and wilderness areas.

### **What happens when National Parks must pay their way**

Adopting a business-like approach by focussing on marketing, promoting and facilitating tourism and recreation will result in park management being influenced by those wanting to exploit national parks for profit, despite a stated concern for the environment by those groups. For every operator concerned for the environment there are another ten itching for more access to increase profits in the name of balanced use.

To quote Peter Cochrane "I unquestionably and undeniably have a commercial interest, and I have the interests of my employees at heart, I have the interests of my community at heart, and as the Mayor of Cooma I'm concerned for the economy of the entire area, and I certainly won't be dictated to by the National Parks and Wildlife Service or any other government group who thinks that they can in any way inhibit the growth of our society so far as recreation is concerned" (ABC transcript, 29/4/01). Mr Cochrane is a trenchant opponent of wilderness and it was his highly orchestrated campaign that led to a the dropping of the proposed karst zone being horse riding free in the current draft Kosciuszko plan of management. Karst is highly vulnerable to weed invasion and polluted waters and that is the fate awaiting these areas. Even the identified Tabletop wilderness will be subject to commercial horseriding.

There are legions of self-interested operators ready to derail good intentions and promote instead many nature-compromising schemes under the false flag of eco-tourism. Cablecars, coastal resorts, wilderness lodges and a multitude of motorised intrusions are waiting for their chance to access the quiet realm of wilderness. Such development will trammel wilderness and put a barrier between it and the human soul (Brown, B 1993).

We know that the determination of carrying capacity is vital but inexact, with very little data available to decide the level of abuse an ecosystem can tolerate. In addition to uncertainty is the pressure for a so-called balance between wilderness and development. Supply and demand considerations will influence carrying capacity and the determination of recommended wilderness boundaries. So, for balance, read destruction of wilderness, like at Tabletop in Kosciuszko or the Deua on the South Coast.

The restriction of visitor use is essential in fragile park areas but setting the right number involves park managers in a conflict of interest if the setting of the level of

park use is not just an ecological and moral issue but becomes an economic one as well. When budgets are set for popular parks, managers are tempted to take risks and adverse results will cause irreversible harm.

As commercial tourism becomes a revenue earner for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, park managers and administrators will be tempted to overlook their guardianship role of minimal impact and appropriate use governed, as it should be, by the precautionary principle under the Act. And this focus on revenue becomes an increasing concern when a park administration is confronted with a contracting funding base. Park managers would be tempted to maintain staff levels and income at the expense of the environment through increased commercial revenue streams.

#### Case Study

##### **How on-park accommodation would have diminished our view of the universe**

The new plan of management for the Warrumbungles National Park has established two separate areas of permanent facilities in the heart of the park, instead of relying on the private sector to provide these facilities outside the park (PoM, 1997). The Plan reversed the decision made by Bob Carr in 1986 to remove the cabins from the park when he was Minister for Planning and Environment.

The local Coonabarabran Chamber of Commerce was opposed to roofed accommodation in the park. The Chamber pointed out that Coonabarabran has thirteen motels/hotels/caravan/farmstays etc which provide for 2500 persons per night. The Chamber said that, should more accommodation be required, local business should be approached to expand accommodation in Coonabarabran NOT in the Warraumbungle National Park.

An NPWS economic study found the annual revenue from paid accommodation associated with park visits was \$683,000. The park's Business Plan sought to capture part of that the accommodation revenue identified in the economic study for the park.

The increased light from a 'Bungles modern-day tourist shanty town would have blinded the telescopes of the Siding Springs Observatory, diminishing the effectiveness of the Southern Hemisphere's principle optical telescopes and thereby our vision of the universe.

In January 2000, Environment Minister, Bob Debus rejected the proposed cabins.

#### **Marketing and development would become a management focus**

To part visitors from their money, services have to be provided. Expansion of facilities to meet growing tourist numbers, while at the same time enhancing the conservation management of a reserve, are mutually exclusive policies.

To market parks, saleable and bookable facilities are necessary. The unpriced impacts of tax-payer funded facilities are sewage effluent, roads, carparks and powerlines. So in realising the value of park assets to raise funds for management there are always greater unpriced and unrecoverable ecological impacts.

Expensive wow-factor lookouts and elevated walkways will be developed with the objective of attracting more tourists. These structures are built on the belief that

nature on its own is not good enough. To modify the national park's most scenic points to improve 'marketability' is the wrong message and sets a poor example for society.

A large range of accommodation would be provided in national parks from bush camping to caravan sites, cabins and lodges to cater for all elements of the tourist market. These facilities may be provided by the NPWS as in the case of the Warrumbungles, or by long term lease as in Kosciuszko and at Pretty Beach.

The NPWS will be required to develop retail product lines in partnership with private enterprise. Park managers will become captive of their commercial clients by developing special relationships and working partnerships based on the need for revenue.

Promoting mass tourism to attract large organised groups that inevitably travel by coach requires large parking areas, toilets and, in remote areas, necessitates overnight accommodation on-park. Any revenue for management gained by on-park accommodation would be at a high environmental cost and also at the expense of the local community who are denied the benefit of expanding their town's facilities.

Developing an on-park accommodation approach ignores the experience of the United States park managers who are demolishing such facilities in the Grand Canyon, Sequoia and Yosemite.

### **User pays is a path toward development and is not for the average punter**

Echo Point, Katoomba, has the greatest nature-based visitation in NSW by far, at over 2 million a year, but unfortunately returns nothing for management. Blue Mountains City Council subsidises visitor services provided, while bus operators make big profits.

Charging an entry fee is the only way that increasing access can improve park revenues and reduce subsidies but the fees would have to be greatly increased to recover the current tax-payer support. Such an increase would lead to dramatic increases in development, as park visitors would insist on seeing value for the fees paid.

Fees would also drive away those who could not afford to pay, including large family groups.

### **Park managers become tourist agents**

Park managers will be recruited that have business and financial management skills as these skills will be required to raise park revenues. There will be no additional money available, and so the tasks of publicity, marketing and revenue raising will eat into staff resources allocated to conservation management.

In the context of revenue raising, NSW will have to compete with Queensland and Victoria for tourists. The NPWS will target the "organised holiday maker" with heavy marketing, including those on package tours for international visitors, escalating a NPWS demand-driven ideology. Sustainable use will become damaging overuse and wearing out park facilities leading to another cycle of infrastructure development and environmental degradation.

Field staff will become glorified ticket sellers, traffic wardens and road maintenance crews. Little or no time will be spent on conservation, like the north Queensland national parks that have no money for pest control but there are plenty of government funds for tourist publicity.

### **Broadening appeal to high impact groups degrades conservation management**

The NPWS already has been improving its communication skills by promoting tour opportunities, like trail bike riding in the pristine Tanatwangalo Creek catchment of the South East Forests National Park. Such publicity does not ensure appropriate use, it just increases high impact use at the sites advertised.

The NPWS will seek to broaden its appeal by catering to a broader range of recreation pursuits. By becoming less risk averse, the NPWS would introduce plans of management that greatly expand the number of off road vehicle tracks and horse trails. New tourist destinations will be developed to assist the private sector and other self-interest groups in partnerships through memoranda of understanding that circumvent and dictate park management processes.

In the case of the draft South East Forests Plan of Management over 400 kilometres of exclusive 4WD roads are planned. Even more 4WD roads are planned for the Southern Escarpment Parks in the adjoining region. In 1998 there were 2,136 kilometres of public access roads in National Parks of NSW. There are now more public roads in the parks of the Southern third of NSW alone than there was across the whole state just seven years ago. These newly opened roads include over a thousand kilometres of 4WD roads in national parks and hundreds of kilometres of 4WD roads opened in NPWS identified wilderness.

To maintain newly opened fire roads for their original purpose, large sums of money must be spent in road maintenance. Each cycle of road maintenance results in more soil erosion, stream sedimentation, a wider road, more 4WD vehicle use creating another vicious cycle of on-park degradation.

### **Zoning parks focuses on recreation opportunities**

The NPWS will classify parklands into classes or zones. These zones determine where, how much and what type of development, access and recreation use is allowed in each part of every park.

The development zone will allow for substantial modifications to dominate the immediate landscape. Such modifications in no way enhance the conservation status of the area, satisfy the IUCN definition of a national park or provide for opportunities to restore disturbed lands. The provision of roofed accommodation in this class would involve, as it must, the need for electricity and garbage and sewage disposal.

Under economic imperatives the zoning inexorably ratchets park areas up the categories toward increasing development (just like zoning of private land responds to economic pressures). Park management strategies may state that habitat fragmentation is a main cause of species extinction but on-ground management will facilitate more fragmentation and development in parks. Commercial 4WD tours in identified wilderness and perhaps even that oxymoron the wilderness lodge will be permitted.

## **Endless Economic Growth**

In Kosciuszko National Park commercialisation is continually being expanded to the detriment of the environment. Not satisfied with the concessions gained, the resort developers have succeeded in removal of seven resort areas from the park to facilitate development under the guise of building safety. The 1980's NPWS policy of no new accommodation structures within protected areas was swept aside along with DEC as the economic and political power of resort growth snowballed downhill.

And it is not just Kosciuszko. This policy would apply to situations where existing planning processes have flagged a need for accommodation. Existing structures will be utilised for accommodation as illustrated by the Sydney Quarantine Station, and where its heritage buildings were in the way of planned development vandals conveniently set these alight.

## **Wilderness and commercial use**

Wilderness is sacrosanct. Opening up wilderness to commercial tours would apply economic forces to these last areas where land is managed for nature conservation. Tourism would concentrate in the most dramatic, scenic areas with the best access, competing with existing users, including Duke of Edinburgh award scheme candidates and school parties who depend on such areas being available to them. The Budawang Wilderness has already experienced overuse from promotion and guidebooks. The economic levers of permits and fees would come into play to restrict use, to the disadvantage of schools and others with limited economic resources.

Certainty of outcome and iconic location are essential for the success of the 'eco-tourism' industry and its publicity. Wilderness tours seek a repetitive activity, generally to the same places, to ensure the same outcomes for clients. Tourism will also push for a larger number of groups, if not an increase in group size. These groups tend to mill around, watching, wearing out every stop site on the tour. This pressure will erode wilderness policy framed to control visitor impact.

Wilderness camp sites and lookout points are generally fragile environments, not hardened sites with facilities. For example, cliff edges are known locations for endangered plant communities. Tourism to these areas will exceed the ecological capacity leading to a loss of ecological integrity and soil erosion. If visitation continues it is necessary to install toilets, board walks and elevated campsites. To accommodate commercial use of the Overland Track in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area an easement was excised from the wilderness zone to permit wilderness lodges, large tour parties walking without packs and helicopter support. Dwellings, roads, helicopters and infrastructure should not compromise wilderness.

Even though commercial activities are currently not permitted on the ground in wilderness, it is impossible to control aircraft above these areas. No general aviation rule protects the natural quiet of wilderness areas. Helicopter joy flights can result in the rapid loss of wilderness as experienced in the Punululu (Bungle Bungles) National Park in Western Australia. The Wollemi wilderness in NSW is currently under threat of helicopter joy flights in the Capertee Valley.

## **Adventure tourism and wilderness**

Another form of tourism anxious to get into wilderness is adventure tourism. In the Blue Mountains this activity has developed abseil, canyoning and climbing sites. To reach these sites, many bush tracks have been created, removing vegetation and numerous illegal bolts and rings were installed in the sandstone rock. The establishment of these sites is followed by overuse, erosion and damage to cliff faces, which in some cases can be seen over a distance of many kilometres. In the case of canyoning, stream banks are trampled and peaty rainforest soils eroded.

## **Learned helplessness**

There are also social impacts arising out of allowing commercial tourism in remote areas. The NPWS will eventually be persuaded to impose on bushwalking club leaders similar standards to those imposed upon commercial operators. There are many reasons for increasing standards for volunteer leaders including: issues of equity; public accountability following the recommendations of coronial inquiries; public liability; and litigation for injury compensation. The high level of competencies required for an outdoor commercial guide would drive away voluntary group leaders if the same requirements were applied to them. This trend is to the benefit of eco-tourism but not to society, for as the volunteer social bushwalking clubs decline, so do general fitness levels.

Providing areas for the pursuit of self-reliant recreation and commercial tourism are mutually exclusive objectives. Commercial tourism fosters learned helplessness, as many would believe that they could not gain the levels of competency and support provided by commercial guides. NSW parks would become like Kakadu National Park where most visitors join conducted tours.

Bushwalking clubs present exactly the opposite experience where everyone is required to be self-reliant, and in this co-operative cultural environment even the inept find their way. Eco-tourism would not encourage bush fellowship and skills transfer, as wilderness visits would be a one-off experience rather than part of community life.

Eco-tourism is fatal to wilderness management by accelerating degrading ecological integrity, introducing facilities and increasing social dependence thereby denying a culture self-reliance.

## **A Plan to Stop Commercialisation of National Parks**

The vicious cycle of upgrading park facilities to meet demand must be avoided so that wilderness is not subjected to eco-tourism activities such as joy flights, horse riding and 4WD tours. NSW parks receive over 23 million visits a year, compared with the very heavily promoted parks in the Northern Territory that receive only a little over a million visitors a year. The obvious conclusion is that park visitation can thrive without heavy promotion or diversion of scarce funding.

A visitor management strategy that provides adequate opportunities for quiet enjoyment and ensures the preservation of aesthetic and natural values would have five principles:

- All activities governed by the plan of management;
- No visitor accommodation on-park;

- The majority of each park should be subject to wilderness-style management with suitable areas on the edges set aside for motor vehicles;
- Vehicle access should be on formed 2WD roads approved for use by the plan of management;
- Low key facilities such as picnic tables and basic camping grounds should be located near park boundaries.

Limited high quality road access on the edges of parks and good-quality low key facilities are the key to appropriate visitor management. Almost all heavily used park areas are within an hours walking distance of a vehicle access point. There are some exceptions to the above rule, such as the very attractive Main Range in Kosciuszko National Park and most scenic parts of the Budawang National Park, but they are few.

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