



National Parks Association of the ACT Inc.

1960-2010

50 years of conservation, nature protection and education

The Secretary
Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water
ACT Legislative Assembly

Submission to the Inquiry into Current and Potential Ecotourism of the ACT and Region

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the ACT Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water's Inquiry into Current and Potential Ecotourism of the ACT and Region ("the Inquiry"). As you may know, the National Parks Association of the ACT ("NPA ACT") is a community-based conservation organisation with a fifty year history of working to protect our natural environment through an active outings and workparty program; participation in Parkcare activities; an extensive publication program; public meetings and conferences and engagement with government policies and programs. The NPA ACT has a particular interest in how the ACT's conservation reserves are managed and the impact of tourism and recreation on conservation reserves.

The NPA ACT is as its name suggests an ACT-based organisation and therefore its comments to the Inquiry will be primarily focussed on ACT matters and, in particular, matters affecting the ACT's conservation reserves.

The NPA ACT firmly believes that appropriate and sustainable visitation activities within conservation reserves are a vital tool in maintaining community support for these reserves and improving the community's understanding of ecological processes. It also believes that low impact tourism is an untapped market in the ACT and there is limited promotion of the ACT's natural beauty.

Definitions

The NPA ACT notes that the Inquiry is about "ecotourism" however the terms of reference for the Inquiry do not contain a definition of ecotourism.

The peak national body for the ecotourism industry, Ecotourism Australia, uses the following definition to describe ecotourism: "*ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation*". The emphasis is on commercial activities and the application of such a definition would exclude many current visitations to the ACT conservation reserves as these are not commercially based.

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The NPA ACT would therefore urge the Standing Committee to also consider the impacts of non-commercial tourism activities. Such activities include ranger guided walks, sporting events held within conservation reservations and other recreational activities conducted in the ACT's conservation reserves.

Principles for ACT Ecotourism in conservation reserves

The NPA ACT suggests that there should be some basic principles underlying any ecotourism strategy in ACT parks and reserves eg:

- Investment in maintaining, improving and promoting existing good quality, low-impact park facilities, experiences and basic services. Greatly improving and expanding information and promotion. Such actions provide the basis for enjoyable park visitation and nature based tourism, and always will.
- Undertake an experience audit of the park system. Identify opportunities for improved presentation of existing experiences. Consider any need for additional basic facilities such as walking tracks, picnic areas and lookouts across the ACT and identify the most appropriate locations.
- Analyse existing visitation patterns in spatial, demographic and trend terms. Compare against park condition audits and focus promotion on those parks that are accessible to markets and able to cope environmentally.
- Ensure that any initiatives are commercially sound and will return to the government sufficient funds to justify the risk and expense of their development.

These principles should be implemented in conjunction with an comprehensive outdoor recreation strategy.

Existing Frameworks

The ACT has a nature based tourism strategy which was published in 2000. This covers ecotourism as well as a broad range of non-commercial activities. Many of the proposals put forward in this strategy have not been implemented, although some are well underway such as the emphasis on Tidbinbilla as a nature based tourism destination and the development of a walking trails strategy.

The ACT also has plans of management in place for all of its conservation reservations and each of these have tourism and recreation management objectives consistent with the primary conservation objectives for these reserves. (Noting that in valley area of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve conservation is one of the management objectives but not the primary one.)

Visitation

The NPA ACT would contend that the vast majority of visits to the ACT's conservation reserves are from ACT residents or tourists from outside of the high-end market spectrum. There is a focus by these visitors on recreation or other low impact activities. A key drawcard for these visits is the natural qualities represented by the conservation reserves and

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significant developments within conservation reserves have the potential to erode these important ecological values.

It is noted that the ACT has few nature-based tour operators and that initiatives to attract “high end” tourists through exclusive access tours to our conservation reserves have not been successful. This would not augur well for any proposal to develop significant accommodation infrastructure within the ACT’s conservation reserves. One of the problems for areas such as Namadgi or Tidbinbilla is their relative isolation. While accessible by car there is no public transport to these areas and it would be highly unlikely for such public transport access to be cost efficient. This reduces the attractiveness of these areas to tourists with limited transport options.

The NPA ACT notes that the volunteer program at Tidbinbilla has appeared to have been popular with visitors, presumably because the needs of the visitors are being met by well-trained volunteers.

Recreational Events

The ACT’s conservation reserves have also hosted significant recreational events such as the Australian orienteering championships and the Capital Punishment bike ride. Claims for the economic impact of such events on the ACT tourism sector lack audit assurance. There needs to be a sound business case established for any major event in national parks and reserves which addresses such issues as overall cost to government, environmental risk management and impact on overall tourism numbers.

The increasing opportunities to hold more large scale sporting events in the ACT’s park and reserves presents both an opportunity to leverage our natural bush setting into increased tourism as well as a threat to negatively impact on the environmental values of our nature reserves and on the ability of ACT citizens to enjoy them in peace. The current ad hoc approach to recreation in nature reserves put these environmental and recreational values at risk.

The NPA ACT and Orienteering ACT facilitated a study of the impact on the environment arising from the Australian orienteering championships. While the results are yet to be released, preliminary findings indicate that the grasslands in which the championships were held do have a capacity to recover. These preliminary findings need to consider the very wet spring and summer following the championships and would indicate that grasslands, in the main, will regenerate given sufficient time and favourable weather. A key finding was that the number of participants in an event is an important factor on the ability of the environment to recover.

Such research is required across the breadth of the ACT’s conservation reserves in which significant recreation events are planned. It also reinforces the need for the ACT to have an outdoor recreational strategy that identifies areas for all recreation and reduces the pressure of recreation on the ACT’s conservation reserves. While the ACT does have some recreation

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strategies there is no overall recreational strategy that provides an overall framework across the ACT.

Commercialisation of ACT Conservation Reserves

It is often proposed that the introduction of commercial activities, such as accommodation, into conservation reserves is a way of increasing visitor numbers. The NPA ACT would contend that:

- Such activities may often be contrary to the legislative management objectives for the ACT's conservation reserves;
- Government subsidies should not be used to support such activities;
- Independent analysis of the viability of such activities must be completed;
- The local community is best served by having accommodation outside of conservation reserves;
- All ecotourism activities should be conducted by certified ecotourism operators;
- Allocation of concessions must be subject to licensing fees.

Potential for a New National Park

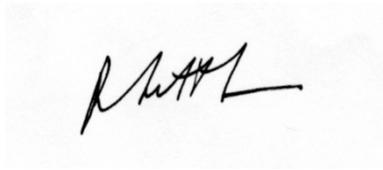
The NPA ACT believes that there is significant ecotourism potential associated with its proposal for a new northern national park for the ACT. The NPA ACT's vision is that ultimately this national park would encompass the areas identified in Attachment A bringing together areas of lowland grassy woodlands which are of national significance. The full extent of the vision is currently not possible due to existing land tenures but a first stage could be achieved through the amalgamation of existing reserves. This would establish a single management regime for these reserves based on the specific requirements of lowland grassy woodlands and be the basis for future expansions.

The ACT's lowland grassy woodlands contain the majority of the remaining high quality areas of yellow box red gum grassy woodlands which are nationally threatened and a listed ecosystem. The establishment of a new national park would raise the national profile of this ecosystem. Due to the positioning of the reserves it would also be an appropriate location for a new national park visitors centre focussing on the excellent work occurring at the Mulligan's Flat sanctuary and the national importance of the ACT's lowland grassy woodlands. The visitors centre would be close to the main northern entrance to the ACT and the major accommodation centres in Canberra.

The NPA ACT would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised within its submission, either in writing to our office address or through email (noting that the NPA ACT office is manned by volunteers and a daily presence is not able to be maintained). Alternatively, I can be contacted on 0410 875 731.

Yours sincerely

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rod Griffiths', is centered on a light-colored rectangular background.

Rod Griffiths
President