

Inquiry into Australia's National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas

Submission

1. The values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

1.1 Because we are a recently developed continent with many as yet intact ecosystems Australia has a global responsibility to preserve natural areas and ecosystems for the sake of preserving biodiversity. It is becoming widely appreciated, not just among scientists, that biodiversity is crucial to the survival of our species on this planet. To quote from Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin in *The Sixth Extinction : biodiversity and its survival*, (1996) : "the environmental health of the Earth's biota flows from an interaction of all its ecosystems" (p.138). The authors go on to describe a study which clearly demonstrated a link between species diversity and the health of a natural ecosystem. (p 141). The air we breathe and the water we drink are products of biodiversity.

So what this boils down to is that Australia needs to put aside (some would say "lock up") natural areas that represent as many different ecosystems as possible for the sake of species preservation. A large proportion of currently reserved areas are the places that are not suitable for human habitation and farming, the 'leftovers'. Furthermore, reserved areas need to be of a minimum size in order to be viable, particularly for the needs of certain fauna species, but also because of such factors as weed invasion.

1.2 Conserving areas of outstanding natural attraction as well as areas of particular cultural or historic significance.

1.3 Making national parks/conservation areas accessible to the public and in such a way that the natural values of the areas are not compromised.

2. Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements

The short answer is that they are not.

In Tasmania, where natural areas are the major source of attraction for visitors to the State, including a large body of bushwalkers, funding for maintenance of existing track infrastructure has been **reduced**. Dedicated professional track workers with years of invaluable experience have been forced to look for alternative employment or seek work interstate. For example, the South Coast Track is one of Tasmania's iconic bushwalks, second only to the (now restricted) Cradle-Mountain Lake St Clair trek in popularity. There have been no funds for maintenance of this track for the last two years. Over the past summer the muddy condition of extensive sections of this track has aroused much resentment among walkers and was the direct cause of some visitors not only abandoning this particular trip but also a planned two month holiday in the State.

3. Any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

- 3.1** The prime threat to the objectives and management of our national parks etc. is one of attitude on the part of governments. At a time when the principles of economic rationalism are fashionable, national parks and reserves are seen by some in authority as 'useless' and of value only if they can generate revenue. It is imperative that this narrow and shortsighted view is not applied to something priceless and which we have a responsibility to maintain for future as well as present generations.
- 3.2** In keeping with the above is the threat to the integrity of national parks/reserves etc created by allowing private developments within national parks. This has become a trend in Tasmania, including the excising of part of the South-West National Park so that it could be handed over to a private developer. Even the U.S. does not allow private developments within national parks.
- 3.3** Under-resourcing of national parks and reserves is also a prime threat and a contributing factor to the temptation to invite the private sector in.

4. The responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans.

- 4.1** At the moment the Tasmanian Government does not appear to have a long-term vision for its national parks and reserves and it is imperative that it does. The N.P.W.S. of N.S.W. has advisory bodies representing a variety of interests and areas of expertise from the community, including the National Parks Association, a NGO whose very reason for existence is to preserve and promote national parks. The Tasmanian (and other State) Governments need to do the same, drawing upon community expertise and keeping a wary eye on participation from interest groups who would like to use parks/reserves for profit or for environmentally damaging pastimes (such as 4WD use). Bodies such as the National Parks Association could make valuable contributions to long-term planning.
- 4.2** As mentioned previously, governments have a responsibility to adequately fund and resource national parks and reserves so that they can fulfil the objectives and management of these areas.
- 4.3** It is quite possible for Governments to create a "win-win" for both the local economy and the environment by allowing for privately owned tourist developments outside national parks as has been done at Cradle Mountain, at Freycinet National Park and which could have been done at Cockle Creek, southern Tasmania, instead of excising part of the South- West National Park to hand over to a (non-local) developer.

5. The record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

- 5.1** My experience is only of the Tasmanian situation. As mentioned above, the current Tasmanian Government does not appear to recognise that the principal attraction of Tasmania for both interstate and overseas visitors as well as for a large proportion of the 'seachange' new residents is Tasmania's as yet unspoiled natural beauty, something which becomes more and more precious and valued in a fast-developing world. To neglect national parks and reserves in favour of resource-based industries, many of which degrade or destroy natural areas, does not make sense on any count.
- 5.2** As mentioned above, Tasmania is going backwards in maintaining the walking track infrastructure within existing parks.
- 5.3** The Tasmanian public continues to have to wage battles to save existing conservation areas from being given to private developers (e.g. the recent Walker Corporation plan to build a canal-style housing estate at Ralphs Bay, near Hobart. This would have threatened a wetland bird habitat conservation area but the Government did not see this as an issue. The corporation eventually backed down, probably largely because of the huge public opposition to the proposal).
- 5.4** Not only is the Tasmanian Government letting the national park walking track infrastructure run down but it is also creating disincentives for volunteer track workers to play a role in filling in the gaps. The higher cost of park entry fees and lack of incentives such as fuel rebates for travel to work sites has meant a drop off in interest in the "AdoptATrack" volunteer scheme.

References

Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *The sixth extinction : biodiversity and its survival*, Phoenix, London, 1996.