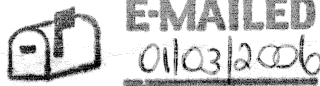




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27th February 2006

The Secretary,
Senate Environment,
Communications Information Technology and the
Arts References Committee Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600

To The Secretary,

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

Further to a recent Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Tourism Forum, Tourism Industry Liaison Group I write to you in my capacity as Chair of the Far North Queensland Tour Operators Association (FNQTOA).

FNQTOA is an industry Association, which has been developed by tourism operators, for tourism operators and is acknowledged by Government and private bodies as the collective voice of land based tour operators in Tropical North Queensland.

The Association is now taking formal steps to lodge a submission in relation to the Senate Inquiry into Australia's National Parks, Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas, with particular reference to National Parks and Conservation Reserves.

THE FUTURE OF FUNDING OF NATIONAL PARKS AND OTHER CONSERVATION RESERVES

Values and Objectives

The management of the Tropical North's extensive system of national parks, and other conservation reserves, is an ongoing compromise between conservation and use. The multiple purposes for which these lands were designated include preservation of ecosystems and wildlife habitat, and recreation.

The pragmatic endeavour of enhancing funding and resources available to meet the objectives of national parks and other conservation reserves is no doubt a significant challenge. Maintenance costs for keeping hundreds of kilometres of roads, trails, bridges and crossings, buildings, and scores of water and waste systems in good condition have outstripped the

maintenance budget for decades. The shortfall is attributed to years of under-funding, increased numbers of visitors, and the natural aging of structures.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Is There Sufficient Funding?

Funding for the maintenance and upkeep of roads in the protected areas falls well short of what is needed.

When the *Wet Tropics Nature Based Tourism Strategy* was first mooted, there existed a road network accessible by motorised vehicle of some 6530 kilometres. Since the introduction of the strategy, the level of funding to maintain this network has been so insufficient there now only exists an accessible road network of 1217 kilometres, due to widespread closures.

Of these 1217 kilometres, approximately 60% of it remains accessible. The balance of 40%, whilst represented on maps as open, is simply inaccessible due to other factors. An example of this is the Culpa Road. This road is one of historical importance, originally a jeep track during World War II connecting Koombooloomba to the Kirrama Range Road, and is abundant in magnificent scenery. However this road remains closed, due to large trees which have fallen across its path. In addition to this, the Wet Tropics Management Authority has registered special considerations against Culpa Road as follows:

Wet Tropics Management Plan 1998, Section 62 – Permit Assessment, Guideline 8

Guidelines for Use of Motor Vehicles on 'Presentation (Restricted) and 'Management' Roads in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area

"... Tully River bridge in dangerous condition (2 tonne limit) – requires repair/replacement."

Advices from the Wet Tropics Management Authority in relation to works to remove the obstacles, and conduct repairs to the Tully River Bridge are that, there are no funds to do so. As a result the current problems will cause further deterioration and require even greater funding to repair.

In short, the ongoing failure to maintain and repair this infrastructure sees the further diminishing of the road network.

User Pays

Although national parks must be regarded principally as reserves for the conservation of nature, they are also used conventionally for certain forms of recreation and commercial operations.

The tourism industry has never had a problem with making an appropriate financial contribution to resolve the issue of under funding in protected areas. However, we express deep concerns that this financial contribution is wholly borne by the operator and not the user of the service.

The industry supports using funds raised from visitors for the actions that benefit protected areas. Thanks to the assistance of the Hon. Desley Boyle, we have started discussions on options for a user-pays scheme in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area (WHA).

The tourism industry is driven mainly by private enterprise. Tour operators are under constant market demands to run not only a profitable business, but also to provide its customers with education and interpretation on the natural area that they are visiting.

A major constraint on tourism operators is the access to the places driven by the markets for their products. Operators are dependent on a market that can have strong seasonal variation and defined requirements around holiday periods and events. As a result, a great deal of certainty in access, timing and facilities is required in order to meet the commercial expectations of reliable and efficient service delivery to domestic and international clients.

A Positive Approach

Recently, engineering inventory was taken on the condition of roads for use by motorised vehicle in the WHA. This could have been seen as a positive step towards identifying those roads most in need of maintenance. However, the reasoning presented is to close those in most need of repair, as a result of their injurious nature, and that a severe lack of funding does not allow for their adequate repair. As a result the downward spiral in the loss of roads continues.

Instead, a positive approach that is ultimately hinged on the adequate level of funding must be taken. The management of the road network in protected land areas is vitally important. An approach required from both state and federal levels of government as well as a user-pays system is required to ensure adequate ongoing maintenance.

Summary

It is our belief that ensuring a well maintained, accessible road network throughout the Tropical tourism in protected areas can play a role in fostering the notion of stewardship by making Australians more appreciative of nature. For many people, the only chance to access and appreciate the deeper parts of the WTWHA is via a motorised vehicle. It allows for the guiding principles outlined in the *Wet Tropics Nature Based Tourism Strategy* to enhance a visitors understanding of the significance of the role of tourism plays in highlighting the impacts of contemporary consumer lifestyles on the natural environment

Park managers need to be supported through the implementation of a system to evaluate the condition of roads and set priorities for what needs to be repaired first. Yet, funding is so insufficient that once roads become degraded or impassable due to events of nature, i.e. fallen trees or inclement weather, closure is the easiest option. Firstly, money which is not there does not have to be spent fixing the problem and secondly, money is then not required for ongoing maintenance.

Until the backlog of deferred maintenance roads is substantially reduced and instituted measures to prevent its recurrence occur, parks will no longer be for people. In coming years access will not be possible in any form other than by foot, and even then only for those among us more adventurous in nature.

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Quality roads are needed to ensure that people, for years to come can enjoy and be inspired by the Tropical North's unique national parks and conservation areas and be inspired by their splendour and funding in its current form is insufficient to meet this objective.

The Association welcomes contact at anytime to further discuss elements of this submission, on the contact details provided

We look forward to hearing the decision of the committee.

Yours sincerely,



Gordon Dixon
President