



28th February, 2006

Committee Secretary
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology
and the Arts Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

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Dear Secretary,

Please find attached a submission from Ecotourism Australia for the Senate Inquiry into funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's National Parks, other Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas.

Ecotourism Australia would welcome the opportunity to provide further input into the Senate Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact me should any additional information be required.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "SP", written in a cursive style.

Stephen Pahl
Chief Executive Officer



Senate Inquiry into Funding and Resources Available to Meet the Objectives of Australia's National Parks, Other Conservation Reserves and Marine Protected Areas

Ecotourism Australia Submission

BACKGROUND

Ecotourism Australia (EA) is the peak national body for Australia's ecotourism industry. EA has a diverse membership that includes key industry sectors such as including ecotourism accommodation, tour and attraction operators; tourism planners; protected area managers; academics and students; tourism, environmental, interpretation and training consultants; local and regional tourism associations and travellers. EA has over 550 members and represents an industry of an estimated 3000 eco- and nature-based tourism operators around Australia.

EA has a strong interest in issues associated with establishment, resourcing and management of Australia's National Parks and other protected areas. National Parks provide the fundamental product for many of Australia's eco- and nature-based tourism businesses. In each Australian State and Territory Eco and Nature-based tourism operators work with protected area managers. Their businesses are often greatly affected by the National Park estate and its management. Issues ranging from the condition of visitor infrastructure within National Parks to commercial operator licensing systems impact significantly on tour operators that access Australia's National Parks.

One of EA's key functions is the operation of a world-leading quality assurance Certification program – the ECO Certification Program (formerly known as the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program, NEAP). ECO Certification provides industry, protected area managers, local communities and travellers with assurance that a certified product is backed by a commitment to best practice ecological sustainability, natural area management and the provision of quality ecotourism experiences. ECO Certification provides benefits to operators, managers, communities and travelers. Of particular importance to protected area managers are the following benefits:

- Certification provides a guide to assist operators implement the principles of ecologically sustainable development
- Certification ensures operators continually improve performance to a standard recognised as best practice
- Certification represents a recognised means for protected area managers to identify genuine nature tourism and ecotourism operators
- Certification is a tool for protected area managers to encourage improved practices that lead to less environmental impact

(Full details on ECO Certification can be found on www.ecotourism.org.au)

A review of the management of protected areas needs to establish a consistent and transparent system for recognising and rewarding tourism operators that have ECO Certified products. Benefits to operators could include preferred access status where visitor numbers are limited at a particular site, longer term permission for access (permit or licensing arrangement), provision for establishing a 'partnership' approach between certified operators and protected area management agency.



INQUIRY TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

Protected areas are largely the basis for Australia's vibrant ecotourism and nature-based tourism industry. They represent the key motivation for travel for many tourists, particularly international visitors to Australia. Tourism operators provide the means for many tourists to access and experience Australia's protected areas, enabling them to visit sites they might otherwise not and vastly enhancing their experience through interpretive components of the tour. In fact, tourism is a key mechanism for achieving one of the key values / legislative requirements of protected areas, encouraging visitation and appreciation for the natural environment.

EA recognises the intrinsic values of National Parks and protected areas, however there are very tangible values that must also be recognised. Domestic tourists participating in eco and nature based tourism spent over \$10billion in 2004 accounting for 25% of all domestic overnight visitor expenditure. In addition, approximately 70% of international visitor expenditure was generated by nature based tourism participants, with international nature based participants known to spend significantly more than other international visitors (Source: Tourism Australia 2005 *Niche Market Snapshot on Nature Based Tourism in Australia*). A significant amount of this expenditure occurs in regional areas, reflecting the dispersed nature of natural attractions. The industry results in important employment opportunities particularly in regional areas, many of which are turning to tourism as a result of downturns in traditional industry.

B) Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements;

Tour operators make substantial contributions to protected area management in terms of funding (permit and per head fees) and in-kind (conducting or paying for research, monitoring sites, providing interpretation for visitors, building and maintaining visitor infrastructure and in some cases undertaking hands-on conservation activities). These contributions are not only important additions to government funding, in many instances tourism generated funding for protected areas forms a large part of their budget.

World Heritage sites in Australia are commonly tourism icons. EA is concerned that funding to World Heritage Areas is in general decline at both a Commonwealth and State level. The opportunity for Australia to capitalise on its leading status as a manager of World Heritage sites will diminish if these iconic parks are not proactively managed as the elite areas that their listing attests.

Australia has a unique opportunity to capitalise on its extensive network of World Heritage sites yet there is little evidence of co-operation or consistency across World Heritage sites. There are significant opportunities to build linkages between the managers of World Heritage sites. In the area of presentation in particular, opportunities to present the range (in a collective way) of Australian World Heritage sites to tourists is very under-developed. However the recent partnership between the Department of Heritage and Tourism Australia is very refreshing and a strong step in the right direction.



C) Any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;

Access by non ECO Certified operators increases possibility for negative impacts on the environment (and other visitors) as there is no guarantee of commitment to best practice operations or external monitoring of the business' operations.

D) 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

The Great Barrier Reef is one World Heritage site with which EA has had significant dealings. The GBR is an ecotourism hot spot on a global level and is one of Australia's key tourism assets. Ecotourism as a rapidly growing segment of the tourism industry will rely more and more on the natural and cultural heritage values of the GBR.

The transition away from more exploitative resource based industries on the Reef such as commercial fishing is an essential move from both a perception and sustainability perspective. There is an inherent conflict to, on one hand, promote the GBR as a natural heritage icon, yet at the same time allow this extraordinary natural heritage area to have its wildlife harvested.

EA supported the Representative Areas Plan approach by GBRMPA and believe that the economic value of tourism far exceeds the benefits that can be derived from exploitative activities. I would be greatly concerned if the protection offered by the RAP was diminished under this review process.

The management of the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area is highly regarded around the world. EA would be very concerned if in undertaking the review the GBRMPA lost planning, policy and management effectiveness. Too often centralised policy and planning results in unresponsive and risk averse management styles. The GBR has been very well served by having a specialised Statutory Authority whose primary interest lies in one protected area.

Ecotourism Australia believes it is vital to establish a system for rewarding high quality (ECO Certified) tourism operators for their commitment to best practice. This will lead to better business security, re-investment into protected areas by operators and ensure that only quality operators access the protected area estate.

Recognising the importance of Ecotourism Australia's ECO Certification program and providing tangible benefits to ECO Certified operators will encourage the ecotourism industry to continue to lead the way in developing and adopting best practice standards, and allow protected area managers to focus on environmental management.



SUMMARY

Ecotourism Australia seeks to ensure that the Senate Inquiry into funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas takes into account the strong linkages between protected area management and Australia's nature-based and eco-tourism industry. Not only are these sectors of the tourism industry largely dependent on the protected area estate, they also contribute significantly to its management and achievement of its objectives.

ECO Certification is the world-leading program for quality assurance and recognizing commitment to best practice operations in the eco- and nature-based tourism sectors. It is vital that the review consider ways to reward operators that have certified products and, as such, further encourage those best practice operators. More secure access to protected areas (longer term permits), preferred operator status, and opportunities to develop partnerships with protected area management agencies are examples of such rewards.

Ecotourism Australia would welcome the opportunity to have further input into this inquiry.

For further information please contact:

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