



ACT
Government

Government Response

Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and
Water Inquiry into Current and Potential Ecotourism in the
ACT and Region

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Introduction

Opportunities to engage with the natural environment provide motivation for travel. In addition, nature based experiences and the things people learn about the environment when they travel can further improve environmental awareness and behaviour.

Ecotourism Australia describes ecotourism as ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.

Ecotourism experiences appeal to a niche nature-based segment where the key motivation is learning, appreciation and conservation. Ecotourism experiences can be discrete and educational, and have the capacity to return tangible benefits to the local community and the natural resource.

The term 'ecotourism' is often used as a marketing tool for many natural tourism experiences and is used interchangeably with nature-based tourism

The ACT and nearby regions offer a range of products and experiences that provide the opportunity for visitors and the community to engage with the environment.

In the year ending December 2012 the ACT welcomed 1,955,000 domestic overnight visitors. Of these, an estimated 12 per cent took part in outdoor and nature-based activities during their visit to the ACT. The ACT also welcomed 163,462 international visitors in the year ending December 2012. Of these international visitors, 77 per cent took part in outdoor and nature-based activities during their trip to Australia.

The Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water resolved that:

The Committee inquire into, and report on, the current and potential ecotourism of the ACT and region including the following matters:

- The extent to which organisations currently deliver ecotourism activities in the Region.
- The extent to which these organisations' ecotourism activities demonstrably contribute to, and detract from, conservation and restoration of ecosystems throughout the Region.
- The extent to which these activities contribute to the Region's economy.
- The industry self-regulation and government regulation, including, but not limited to, accreditation and licensing, which is most likely to incentivise ecotourism activities that assist in the protection and enhancement of the Region's ecosystems.

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- The industry and government measures that are most likely to promote understanding of the biodiversity and other benefits of ecotourism organisations explicitly basing their processes and outcomes on principles of ecological sustainability.

Responses to the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water's Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Committee recommends that ecotourism and nature park assets be given a higher profile within future tourism marketing campaigns for the ACT and surrounding region.

Government Position - Agreed

Australian Capital Tourism's promotion of nature park assets in tourism marketing activities over the past 12 months has included;

- inclusion of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Tidbinbilla experiences in part one of the Human Brochure campaign;
- inclusion of the National Arboretum in part 2 of the Human Brochure campaign;
- development of a 12 month tourism partnership prospectus to maximise opportunities for Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to leverage off Australian Capital Tourism destination marketing activities;
- inclusion of content and imagery relating to ACT and region nature based assets in the 2012 and 2013 Canberra and Region Visitor Guides;
- promotion of nature based assets through the Canberra and Region Visitors Centre, including brochure distribution, video display, promotion of tours, inclusion of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve imagery in Visitor Centre displays and organising familiarisation tours for Visitor Centre staff to nature based products;
- inclusion of nature based experiences as part of the 2012 Winter Campaign;
- promotion of nature based products and events on the visitcanberra.com.au website;
- inclusion of nature based experiences in the Visiting Journalists Program; and
- inclusion of Tidbinbilla in Tourism Australia's National Landscapes promotion, 'Making Tracks'.

In addition Australian Capital Tourism maintains representation on the Australian Alps National Landscape working group where opportunities to promote ACT nature based assets are communicated to relevant products and Government departments. This program enables relevant ACT nature based products to be promoted through Tourism Australia's international and domestic campaigns.

Australian Capital Tourism is represented on the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve Advisory Board. This enables tourism promotion opportunities to be communicated to Tidbinbilla Nature

Reserve management. It also ensures senior tourism expertise is available to contribute to advancement of the ongoing potential for ecotourism, business planning and product development at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

Australian Capital Tourism will continue to work closely with the Territory and Municipal Services Directorate (TAMSD) to promote nature based assets through similar channels into 2013. This includes incorporation of new tourism assets into promotional activities including the National Arboretum Canberra and the Centenary Trail.

In addition Australian Capital Tourism will work with Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to assist it in becoming T-QUAL accredited to complement its ecotourism certification. This will enable Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to leverage off considerable investment being made by Tourism Australia to promote T-QUAL accredited products, as well as benefit from preferential product listings on the visitcanberra.com.au and australia.com websites.

Australian Capital Tourism will continue to work with ecotourism operators and product managers to assist with product development and capacity building. This includes promoting opportunities and providing assistance for ecotourism operators to apply for Federal tourism grant programs, including grants under the Tourism Industry Regional Development Fund (TIRF) and T-QUAL Grants.

Australian Capital Tourism has actively participated in discussions with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elected Board (ATSIEB) regarding options for advancing eco tourism opportunities and exploring the role of traditional owners showing their country to tourists. This will continue as part of the implementation of this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government (a) continue to contract community groups, on basis of merit, to provide ecotourism services and (b) maintain and enhance working relationships with those groups into the future.

Government Position - Agreed

In July 2012, the ACT Government entered into revised contractual arrangements with Conservation Volunteers Australia (CVA) to provide volunteer interpretive services to Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park. The arrangements were based on a previous contract with CVA which expired on 30 June 2012. The revised contract requires CVA to provide a range of environmental interpretation services and represents an expansion of previous arrangements to include new sites within Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and, for the first time, includes a site in Namadgi National Park.

CVA is also continuing to promote the *Tidbinbilla by Torchlight* ecotours which are run by CVA staff and volunteers, with support from staff of the ACT Parks and Conservation Service. Although these tours are presently small in scale, they represent an important emerging ecotourism product for the ACT.

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service has entered into an informal arrangement with CVA to provide a defined work program for CVA's *Better Earth* environmental volunteer program. The *Better Earth* program is an excellent example of ecotourism in that its participants make a direct and substantial contribution to environmental improvements to the place they visit, as well as making cultural and social connections to local people and fellow participants.

The ACT Parks and Conservation Service continues to work with community groups and individuals to facilitate their involvement in a range of small scale ecotourism-related activities including participation in events such as the Tidbinbilla Extravaganza and participation in educational programs at Birrigai Outdoor School.

Options for advancing eco tourism opportunities and exploring the role of traditional owners showing their country to tourists will be considered as part of the implementation of this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider creating a new nature park in the northern part of the ACT, in order to conserve local woodland environments and expand the ACT's range of nature park assets.

Government Position – Agreed in principle

The ACT Government agreed in principle to a recommendation of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment concerning the possible establishment of a northern ACT national park. The Government noted that further consideration will be given to a northern ACT national park, including through canvassing all the relevant issues such as legislation, biodiversity values, review of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categories, management implications and planning. Implementation arrangements and likely resourcing needs will require further consideration and examination.

If such a reserved area was to be created, it would require additional recurrent funding to the ACT Parks and Conservation Service to provide an adequate level of land management capacity.

Any park development would need to be considered in the context of potential land release in the nearby area aligned with any consequent offset requirements.

Consultation with traditional custodian groups in a culturally sensitive manner will be undertaken in the implementation of this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider creating a new nature park to preserve, maintain and make accessible Ginninderra Falls with sufficient surrounding land to constitute a sustainable nature park asset.

Government Position - Noted

Ginninderra Falls lies within private property in NSW and is outside of ACT jurisdiction. The Chief Minister has commenced discussions with the NSW government on this matter. Options are being jointly developed by the ACT and NSW Governments to support this initiative.

Consultation with traditional custodian groups in a culturally sensitive manner will be undertaken in the implementation of this recommendation.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government makes the provision of appropriate tracks, signage and transport facilities a priority in its management of nature park assets and its tourism policy more generally.

Government Position - Noted

Priorities for management of the ACT conservation estate assets are based primarily on risk. High priority risks include threats to biodiversity values, water quality and public safety. Priorities are also set by legislation, through Government directions and commitments and as a result of public requests and community needs including tourism.

Visitor infrastructure and facilities play a central role in supporting visitation and ecotourism. Maintaining the extensive range of such facilities is core business for the ACT Parks and Conservation Service. In recent years, the ACT Government has invested heavily in upgrading and providing new facilities. Key recent examples include the Gibraltar Peak Trail at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve which was completed in April 2012, and the Centenary Trail which is scheduled for official opening in late 2013.

Over the past decade, the ACT Government has also made significant investments in trails and signage upgrades within Canberra Nature Park, the Murrumbidgee River Corridor, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, Namadgi National Park and Googong Foreshores. In addition, provision and maintenance of the extensive network of management and fire trails throughout the non-urban areas of ACT has been undertaken through the Bushfire Operational Plan. This network of trails represents a significant resource for public use and recreation.

The ACT Government has also supported and facilitated community groups with an interest in trail maintenance and trail building. For example, informal trails at Bruce Ridge Nature Reserve have been rationalised and maintained through the Friends of Bruce Ridge volunteer group, while an extensive network of volunteer-built trails in Kowen Forest have been used for several large mountain biking events including the Mont 24 hour race and the Kowalski Classic.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government develop and implement, within the next 12 months, programs and tools to gather, store, analyse, and publish data on

ecotourism and all nature-based tourism in the ACT and its region, on indices comparable to those used by Tourism Research Australia.

Government Position - Noted

Through the National Visitor Survey (NVS) and International Visitor Survey (IVS), Tourism Research Australia gathers a broad range of data each quarter on tourist visitation at the national, state/territory and regional level.

The NVS is Australia's primary measure of domestic tourism activity, being the major source of information on the characteristics and travel patterns of domestic tourists. Respondents are interviewed in their homes using random digit dialling and a Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system.

The IVS represents the most comprehensive source of information on international visitors to Australia. The survey is conducted by Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) in the departure lounges of Australia's eight major international airports.

While it is not possible to strictly isolate eco-tourists via the NVS and IVS data, it is possible to estimate the number of visitors that have participated in the following activities which would fall under a broad 'nature-based' tourism heading:

- a. Visit national parks or state parks
- b. Visit botanical or other public gardens
- c. Bushwalking or rainforest walks

The NVS can provide an estimate of the number of domestic visitors who undertook these activities while in the ACT, however the IVS can only provide an estimate of the number of international visitors to the ACT who participated in these activities during their trip to Australia (i.e. not specific to each state and territory).

The ACT Government can better utilise this data on a quarterly basis to track, analyse and distribute information on the number of visitors to the ACT who undertake nature-based activities of this kind. Periodically, Tourism Research Australia also releases market sector snapshots on nature based tourists which provide further detail on the characteristics and travel behaviour of these visitors. The opportunity therefore exists for the ACT Government

to share this information more widely with relevant stakeholders in the nature-based and eco-tourism sector.

In instances where additional visitor data is being collected (e.g. via information centres at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park or through organised nature-based tourism activities) there is also scope for Australian Capital Tourism to provide advice on the structure and content of these survey tools to ensure that the data being captured is both relevant and useful for the purpose of analysis and future planning.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government promote and facilitate certification by Ecotourism Australia for ecotourism operators in the ACT.

Government Position - Agreed

Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Birrigai at Tidbinbilla are certified as Advanced Ecotourism operators by the Ecotourism Association of Australia. While there are over 600 accredited operators in Australia, no other operators in ACT have ecotourism accreditation.

Being Ecotourism Accredited under Ecotourism Australia's accreditation scheme enables Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Birrigai at Tidbinbilla to gain T-QUAL accreditation. T-QUAL Accreditation is Australia's national tourism accreditation framework, identifiable by a national symbol of quality, the *T-QUAL Tick*.

Australian Capital Tourism will continue to promote relevant accreditation programs and the value of accreditation to tourism businesses in the ACT.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government engage, both as a participant and facilitator, in the kind of partnership arrangements which characterise the best instances of ecotourism in the country.

Government Position – Agreed

The ACT Government, through Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Australian Capital Tourism, engage with the Australian Alps National Landscapes working group to maximise the value of the program to the ACT. Managed by Tourism Australia and Parks Australia, The National

Landscapes partnership aims to achieve environmental, social and economic outcomes for Australia's most significant natural areas and their surrounding regions. The National Landscapes program is a partnership between tourism and conservation to ultimately provide the customer with new and engaging experiences encouraging increased awareness, visitation, dispersal and length of stay within and around Australia's most distinct natural environments.

The ACT Government through TAMSD manages the ACT's commitment to the Australian Alps partnership with New South Wales and Victoria. The Australian Alps partnership sees agencies working in partnership to achieve excellence in conservation management of the Australian Alps national parks' natural and cultural values and sustainable use through an active program of cross border co-operation. This includes provision of outdoor recreation and tourism opportunities that encourage the enjoyment, and understanding, of alpine and sub-alpine environments.

The ACT Government will consider representation of the most relevant agency on the Tourism and Protected Areas Forum (TAPAF). TAPAF is a forum of all the State Tourism Agencies and National Park/land management agencies across Australia. TAPAF is a national information exchange group between state protected area management agencies which also includes state government tourism representatives.

Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve will maintain its Advanced Ecotourism Operator status by the Ecotourism Association of Australia and progress obtaining T-QUAL accreditation through engaging with Ecotourism Australia.

In addition Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve will continue to identify ways to enhance its partnership with Conservation Volunteers Australia and the delivery of interactive services to visitors at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve.

Australian Capital Tourism will encourage ecotourism operators to participate in the Australian Tourism Awards program as a business development exercise.

RECOMMENDATION 9

The Committee recommends that the ACT Government consider ways to support the provision of environmental and sustainability education to ecotourists to the ACT, including the training of ACT ecotourism providers to deliver this education.

Government Position - Agreed

The partnership between Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and CVA delivers a number of education programs.

The Volunteer Interpreter Program (VIP) provides opportunity for volunteers to receive formal environmental and communication training, mentoring and ongoing professional development. Volunteers engage with visitors in an informal manner throughout the Sanctuary offering information, advice and interesting insights. Tidbinbilla will continue to work closely with CVA to grow the value of the program.

The *Discover Our Wild Side* program is evolving and provides the opportunity for visitors to venture beyond reserve management gates on this exclusive, behind the scenes, endangered wildlife experience.

This small group adventure (two days) takes visitors beyond the boundaries to uncover the hidden secrets of Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. The tour is managed by CVA guides and Tidbinbilla Wildlife Officers.

These programs enable visitors to discover the leading role Tidbinbilla plays in breeding the critically endangered Brush-tailed Rock-wallaby and the Northern Corroboree Frog. Visitors personally contribute to this important research as they assist wildlife officers with the wildlife breeding and animal monitoring program of Brush-tailed Rock-wallabies or Potoroos.

Tidbinbilla also manages Ranger guided walks and activities. Regular walks and fun activities are conducted every weekend, public holidays and selected days during school holiday.

The ACT Government through TAMSD will continue to enhance and develop the educational experiences available to visitors across ACT parks and reserves. This includes Namadgi National Park, Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, and ACT Nature Parks.

The development of the Centenary Trail and the opening of the National Arboretum Canberra will provide additional opportunities for commercial partnerships and provision of interactive educational experiences for visitors.

Options for advancing eco tourism opportunities and exploring the role of traditional owners showing their country to tourists will be considered as part of the implementation of this recommendation.

