

Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens Inc.

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Secretary

Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water

ACT Legislative Assembly

GPO Box 1020

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30 April 2012

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

The Friends is a volunteer group whose charter is to provide support to the Australian National Botanic Gardens. There are approximately 1700 members, drawn largely from the ACT and surrounding region. We have noted the submission tabled with the Inquiry by the Executive Director of the Gardens and we support the points made in that submission. We would like to add some comments on our behalf.

The Australian National Botanic Gardens is a world class facility, representing the major living collection of Australian native plants. The Gardens has a charter to display these plants, to inform visitors and those who use its published and online resources about native plants and to be a centre of excellence for research into native plants.

Any consideration of ecotourism for the ACT and Region must place the Gardens as a central resource. Its research and public information programs have a key role to play in addressing the environmental challenges facing this region and Australia as a whole. Visitors should be strongly encouraged to visit the Gardens and learn about Australian plants and their importance.

Visitors to the Gardens can experience and come to appreciate the main characteristics of many of Australia's ecological zones. The Gardens has major displays and interpretation of Australia's rainforests, from Tasmania to southern Queensland, the flora of the Sydney region, vegetation of the low-rainfall Mallee zones of southern Australia and, in 2013, will open a very significant new garden featuring plants of the arid Red Centre of Australia.

The Friends have the view that the ACT Government should have a greater interest and involvement in the Gardens. Although the Gardens are a national institution they are an important part of what Canberra can offer to visitors. Coordinated programs for the National and Territory institutions that have ecological and environmental responsibilities would pay dividends to the Territory in terms of ecotourism. For example, close linkages between the Gardens, the National Arboretum, CSIRO and Tidbinbilla would work well for ecotourism.

We feel that the ACT has a lot to offer in relation to education programs, both for local schools and higher education facilities and, particularly for education based visits from outside the region. The Gardens already offer a lot in relation to education but there is scope for much more to be done if adequate resources and good coordination is available.

The Friends provide the guides at the Gardens and would be interested in working with ecotourism programs to provide more themed walks and other activities. Many of the guides are also education officers, taking schools and other groups around the Gardens under the education programs. The Friends are funding a staffing a new venture for the Gardens; an electrically powered mini bus, the Flora Explorer, which will take visitors on one-hour motorised tours of the Gardens. This will be a very significant development, enabling young families and visitors with mobility problems to experience parts of the Gardens that they otherwise miss.

If there is to be a focus on the benefits for the ACT and region from ecotourism then the Australian National Botanic Gardens is a key resource that needs to be at the centre of such programs. If there is interest in the Australian environment then there is nothing more important than our native plants and how they might respond to the challenges. This is something ecotourism can promote to the benefit of the ACT and Region.

David L Coutts

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