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STANDING COMMITTEE ON CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT AND WATER

INQUIRY INTO CURRENT AND POTENTIAL ECOTOURISM IN THE ACT AND REGION

SUBMISSION FROM DR DAVID HOGG, PRINCIPAL, DAVID HOGG PTY LTD

Introduction

The following submission reflects my personal views developed over the past 40 years as a professional working in environmental and recreational planning in the ACT and surrounding region. Some of the points are of a general nature and are relevant to several of the terms of reference of the inquiry.

Definition of Ecotourism

The terms of reference of the inquiry do not define what is intended to be covered by the term, 'ecotourism'. A website search for such a definition indicated that there is no universally agreed definition and that the boundaries between ecotourism and other forms of tourism and recreation are somewhat blurred. One broad definition which appears on the website of The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the wellbeing of local people'.

Ecotourism in the 'Big Picture'

The ACT and its region contain large natural areas which are visited by people from other parts of Australia and overseas and are also important for the wellbeing of local communities. The ways in which the natural values of these areas are used are very diverse. Some people use these areas primarily to develop their appreciation of natural values at varying levels of detail (e.g. ornithologists, other naturalists, visitors enjoying nature interpretation), in keeping with what is probably the most widely accepted concept of ecotourism.

For a large proportion of visitors, however, these natural values provide the setting for activities such as sightseeing, general relaxation and active recreational pursuits, both organised and informal. While these visitors may not come primarily to appreciate the detailed natural attributes of the region, such appreciation is often a

secondary benefit. This is therefore one area where the blurring of the ecotourism definition becomes evident.

The point of these comments is that, while the Standing Committee is considering ecotourism, it should do so in the context of the 'big picture' of natural resource management, as many of the benefits, opportunities, problems and costs associated with ecotourism cannot be divorced from those associated with other activities based around the natural environment.

TOR (a). Delivery of ecotourism activities

While not specifically stated, it may be interpreted from the terms of reference that the inquiry is focused particularly on commercial organisations that provide ecotourism services. However, government and community organisations also play a major role in delivering ecotourism activities. The government organisations include those responsible for managing national parks, nature reserves and other public reserves in the ACT and surrounding areas of New South Wales. The commercial organisations include those for which nature conservation and appreciation is a primary purpose, as well as those for which nature appreciation can follow as a side-benefit of their primary purpose (e.g. clubs involved in activities such as bushwalking, orienteering, rogaining and horseback trail riding).

All of the above organisations currently have an active role in delivering activities which are either directly focused on ecotourism and have side-benefits related to ecotourism. The government organisations also have a role in providing the necessary infrastructure (e.g. access, parking, visitor amenities) in public land. While such infrastructure is being progressively upgraded, limitations in infrastructure and managements restrictions due to infrastructure deficiencies are a significant impediment to natural area use and appreciation.

For example, there are many natural areas where the choice of location for appreciating the natural environment is limited by the opportunity to park a significant number of vehicles safely without conflicting with other management objectives (e.g. through parking on grassed areas). Consequently, the management approach is sometimes to restrict public vehicle access to the point where the real value of those areas to the community falls well below its potential value. This is evident particularly in Namadgi National Park and also in some Canberra Nature Park areas, for example.

There are some ecotourism opportunities which are currently precluded by land ownership and/ or related legal issues. One topical example is Ginninderra Falls, located just outside the ACT near Belconnen, which is a logical extension to the Murrumbidgee River Corridor within the ACT, but has its own exceptional natural values. While there have been private attempts in the past to open up this area for ecotourism and related recreation, these have proved to be unviable on a purely private basis. A community group has recently formed which is seeking government support for making this area generally accessible. Such efforts, however, are complicated by the fact that, while the area lies in New South Wales, its access is from the Canberra urban area, and the main benefits of any ecotourism promotion are likely to accrue to Canberra residents or visitors. This is a specific example

where a regional approach is appropriate, in keeping with the scope of the current inquiry.

TOR (b). Effects on Conservation and Restoration of Ecosystems

Viewed objectively, there is little evidence of ecotourism and related activities detracting from the conservation and restoration of ecosystems throughout the region. The greatest impacts tend to be associated with the provision of physical infrastructure (e.g. roads, parking, walking tracks, visitor centres) but such impacts, if well planned and managed, are a small price to pay for the substantial social benefits of enabling natural areas to be used and appreciated. Any impacts of activities that occur away from such infrastructure (e.g. off-track bushwalking, orienteering, rogaining) are generally minimal and temporary.

TOR (c). Contribution to the Region's Economy

Any form of tourism or other visitor promotion has potential to benefit the region's economy. In the context of ecotourism, the easier it is for people to experience natural areas, the more people will be attracted and the greater will be the benefits.

To be realistic, it is likely that ecotourism in all forms would contribute only a minor component of the tourist income of the region, but it can be very important to certain sectors of the community, including ecotourism operators themselves and community organisations involved in promoting activities in natural areas. High profile events that depend on natural areas and attract interstate visitors (e.g. orienteering, rogaining) often benefit the local community (e.g. bushfire brigade, local service clubs) through the opportunities that they provide for fundraising through catering, as well as through regular tourist services.

TOR (d). Regulation

There is a growing trend in society towards increased government regulation, often with significant social and economic costs and sometimes with questionable benefits. I feel that excessive regulation has the potential to present the greatest threat to the appreciation of natural areas by the community. It is important to avoid introducing unnecessary regulations to address problems which, on close examination, are minor or non-existent.

There is much emphasis these days on undertaking detailed environmental assessments before approving physical development works. I feel that it is just as important to thoroughly assess the impacts (environmental, social and economic) of any new regulatory measures before they are introduced. The Standing Committee should not recommend the adoption of any new regulatory measures without such assessments.

TOR (e). Ecological Sustainability Measures

As a general principle, I would advocate the importance of government working with industry to address any problems or concerns relating to the ecological sustainability of ecotourism or related activities. The people most knowledgeable about such

activities and their management are generally those directly involved with them, rather than government regulators. While regulators may see the problems, it is the proponents or participants who are best placed to develop the solutions.

It is important also to focus on positive management of ecotourism and related natural area activities. Such a management approach should aim to work out how to facilitate beneficial activities with least impact. This will deliver a more sustainable outcome than a negative management approach, which endeavours to curtail such activities through prohibition or excessive restrictions.

Appearance at Public Hearing

I would be willing to appear at a public hearing to elaborate on the above matters or to provide other advice that may be useful to the Standing Committee.

David Hogg
20 April 2012