

From: Di Thompson
Sent: Wednesday, 9 April 2008 9:02 AM
To: Committees
Cc: Derigo, NicolaT (LA)
Subject: Inquiry into Namadgi POM

Committee Members
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment
ACT Legislative Assembly

Dear Messrs Gentleman, Porter and Dunne

I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into the draft Namadgi National Park Plan of Management as advertised in the Canberra Times of 15th March 2008.

As background, I would advise that I was one of the non-Aboriginal members of the former Interim Namadgi Advisory Board. My capacity on that Board was that of the environmental specialist. In that role I maintained close contact with the peak environmental bodies in the ACT (namely, the Conservation Council and the National Parks Association), the major bushwalking groups (Canberra Bushwalking Club, Family Bushwalkers Inc), and others including representatives and members from Kosciuszko Huts Association, the Canberra Cross Country Ski Club, plus individuals with environmental, cultural and scientific interests.

I am also a current member of the Snowy Mountains Region Advisory Committee and the Cooma Monaro Bushfire Management Committee. Past positions on former committees include: Kosciuszko Plan of Management Community Forum (POM finalised in 2006) and the Wild Horse Management Steering Committee (KNP).

As advised through Ms Nicola Derigo, the Committee has noted the very high level of community interest in the development of the draft Namadgi POM. Whilst I would err on caution with respect to opening another consultation process, it is regrettable that the latest version of the draft POM has not been available. It is now 2 years since the last draft was provided to Board members, and many of the references to key areas of change in the draft POM in Attachment B on the Report on Submissions June 2007 are left unexplained. These include but are not limited to:

- a.. Ch. 3 Park Zoning - Management considerations and policies relating to large group activities are contained in Ch. 8.
- b.. With regard to bicycles and vehicles in the Wilderness Areas, the special conditions under which they may be allowed are included in s.8.7.4 (policy 39.234) and s. 8.8.1 (policy 39.74)
- c.. Management purposes has been defined in the glossary in the back of the final plan (p.212).

My input to the Terms of Reference are below:

The administration of the consultation process during development of the Draft Plan of Management and

The effectiveness of consultation with key stakeholders

I believe this was done well, particularly when one considers that the ACT is a small jurisdiction with unfortunately limited funding and resources given to environmental protection. There were a range of opportunities provided to the community to be advised of issues, contribute to, discuss and to raise new issues from.

It is a fact of life that there will be a full spectrum of opinion on what national parks should be used for, and it is again unfortunate that so many community consultations result in individuals and organisations putting enormous pressure on governments and managers to comply with their needs in today's context, rather than looking to protect and maintain areas such as Namadgi National Park for future generations.

Administrators and managers in a POM process have to be masters at wearing many hats, from educators, to listeners, to pragmatic government policy makers ensuring protection of a rapidly decreasing natural environment.

It should also be recognised that right in the middle of the process, Canberra and Namadgi experienced the January 2003 fires. Given that Namadgi was between 94-96% burned the effect on all who were involved in the management of the park and the POM was profound. The fire event and its aftermath totally disrupted the POM process for some time. The ranger staff also lost 10 houses. Furthermore the fire event has polarised opinions on fire management of the park.

Running parallel to the development of the Namadgi POM, but on a huge scale with a multi-million dollar budget, was the Kosciuszko Plan of Management process.

Namadgi planners maintained close liaison with Kosciuszko planners, NPWS staff and independent scientists. The importance of this cannot be understated, as a large proportion of the community were also key stakeholders in both parks (Kosciuszko and Namadgi), enabling a rapidly developing and extremely high level of understanding of the full range of issues involved. The manner in which Namadgi POM personnel dealt with an enhanced level of public awareness and the resultant lobbying pressures during the POM process is to be commended.

The nature and the level of participation by the Interim Namadgi Advisory Board in developing the Draft Plan of Management

The opinions wrt to the Board are my own and may not be shared by other Board members.

I would like to state at this point that I consider it a privilege to have been a member of the first Interim Namadgi Advisory Board, although the Board no longer functions. It just passed quietly into a black hole. It is a shame that Government has not had the courtesy to write to Board members acknowledging their contribution and advising that the Board would not be continuing.

Members of the Board, were in my opinion, given every opportunity to participate in the POM process and the opportunity to discuss issues as they arose. Members were encouraged to attend the community forums and to seek additional information from Park and administrative staff on any park issue.

One criticism I have, was that the Board undertook very few field trips. This was due to a lack of Park resources, funding for the activity and a reluctance on the part of

some Board members to take the opportunity to attend. I maintain the opinion, and this also applies to my position on Kosciuszko committees, that few members of the Board actually spent any time in the park and know little of the issues when they are first raised. Members also exhibited little ability to identify and raise issues, upon which to develop policy positions, that were outside of a very basic Board agenda. Irrespective of that criticism, because of their individual professional backgrounds, discussion and debate was at times limited to the non-Aboriginal members. A program of field trips would have significantly increased the knowledge and understanding of park management and park protection for all Board members to levels required at the time of drafting of a POM with a 20 year vision.

On the other hand, the Aboriginal members demonstrated a willingness (limited by time, exposure, their other commitments and knowledge) to understand how and why Namadgi needed a POM. Had the Aboriginal members been familiar with modern day park/land management or environmental issues, (and been present at the Board meeting), some outcomes may have been different. This will be an ongoing problem, but it also applies to non-Aboriginal people on Boards and Committees too.

However, every endeavour was made to offer the Aboriginal members the opportunity to discuss park and non-park issues. Special Aboriginal members only meetings which were held the day prior to any scheduled Board meeting. Both Co-Chairs attended.

A key achievement was the Board's support for the employment of several Aboriginal employees. Their arrival co-incided with the January 2003 fires. They were flung into full-on duties, but the formalisation of their training was left relatively unstructured through no fault of any staff. I urge the Committee to understand the extreme difficulties being faced by all staff in Namadgi at that time and in the years following. In the end, some Aboriginal staff obtain employment outside of Namadgi on merit (this was due to the training and experience they gained at Namadgi), and the two remaining trainees 'graduated' with accredited TAFE certificates. The graduation ceremony was a very proud moment for so many, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Unbeknowns to those present, lots of groups, the Board, TAFE people, park staff, office staff, scientists, etc. had each and all found ways of finding the additional funding required to employ the Aboriginal trainees, eked out education programs and found the ways to pull it all together.

The outcome was very good, as in my opinion, the Aboriginal Board members, the Aboriginal community and the non-Aboriginal Board members, gained by the participation and knowledge of park management gained by those Aboriginal trainees. That's not to say it was all smooth sailing, or that things might be done differently in the future. I am also aware, that there is much to be learned by all parties, and that the knowledge and professionalism of the non-Aboriginal park managers must also be recognised. I understand the additional time, resources, understanding and sometimes emotion, required to undertake this type of training and employment is significant, not budgeted adequately for in park allocations and little recognised.

What I am trying to present to Standing Committee members are a selection of collaborate efforts of understanding, of knowledge and of participation which all contributed to a better Plan of Management, despite some of the odds against it at the

time. I don't believe that Government fully understands this. It should also be noted by the Committee that I am not inferring that I agree with all of the approaches or the outcomes in the last known draft POM either.

The Committee should also note that relationships between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on the Board remained sound. Towards the end of the term, serious differences between the Aboriginal people manifested themselves. This was a great shame, particularly as several of the Aboriginal people on the Board were very keen to protect and manage the park for all people and for the future, and were keen to learn and have their people involved in that management.

Namadgi National Park's value as a biodiversity conservation area and as part of a greater regional conservation corridor; including catchment protection and fire management issues

The proof of this remains in the POM. Fire management issues, particularly those relating to fire trails and hazard reduction burns remains an ongoing issue.

Any other relevant matter

General tone of the POM

The POM gives every indication that it has put a priority on meeting the demands and requirements of all users, which is good in principle, but the practical application of that policy may lead to poor environmental outcomes. In the end it is a Government decision, but Committee members need to be aware, the national parks are created for nature conservation, and recreation, and in the instance of Namadgi, to protect the Canberra and Queanbeyan water supplies. There is increasing evidence, both overseas and in Australia, that certain activities have high impacts and a high number of users - this impacts on the land and biodiversity, and managers have had to act accordingly, by controlling for that usage. This can be achieved in many ways - restricting numbers, permit systems, encouraging off-park activities, resting locations (ie camping areas), charging usage fees and bonds, fencing people in or out of areas, providing caretakers, encouraging local or interest group 'ownership' of natural or cultural heritage and weed programs, (in the ACT this is currently performed by the National Parks Association, Canberra Bushwalkers, Kosciuszko Huts Association), etc.

Two examples of my concern are provided below:

Horse riding - The Government response to lobbying from horse riders: Horse riding will continue to be restricted to the east of Old Boboyan Road except for allowing access to the Grassy Creek Trail south of Old Boboyan Road. Access to the Grassy Creek Trail will be permitted once the new trail is constructed and will be subject to continuing right of passage by private landholders. Access to the Grassy Creek Trail will be reviewed following a trial period. Following the trial period, a review of the route may be triggered should environmental impacts, access and compliance issues arise.

Thankfully Government has put this in as a trial with various provisos. It has long been the ambition of horse riders to ride West of the Old Boboyan Road along Grassy Creek. The area is almost pristine, and has little in the form of weed infestations. It also features most of the remaining heritage huts in the park (the draft POM requires

where feasible that horse riders tether their horses 100 metres from the hut). Horse riders have a long record of tethering horses to fragile verandahs and other hut appendages, of camping with their horses very close to the huts and of watering their horses directly from the creeks close to the huts. This high impact and increased visitation of huts in the area is of concern to some Kosciuszko Huts Association members.

The issue of horse riding in the Grassy Creek valley, is more about access than anything else. It can be presented as a safety issue, but given that after egressing from the adjoining private property, the riders are again on NSW roads, the issue of riders on roads still remains. I would suggest that the proposed route and access through private property significantly advantages the commercial horse riding operators from Yaouk and Adaminaby areas. As there is no per head fee required for commercial operations in Namadgi, as is required in Kosciuszko National Park, Namadgi will increasingly attract the frequent and large commercial horse riding parties from that part of NSW.

Commercial operators - NPWS has recently reviewed its commercial licencing system for operators in national parks, and a final report will be released soon. As a charge per head is also required for Outward Bound usage in KNP, it is no surprise that Outward Bound have established their headquarters in Tharwa, and have a very high rate of use of Namadgi. At a time of limited statistics, the Board were shown data that showed of the 8,000 overnights in Namadgi, 6,000 were by Outward Bound. The remaining 2,000 included Defence, Police, scouts, adventurers, DofE, church groups, and bushwalkers. The issue of licencing and charging for commercial use needs also to be addressed in the POM. The argument by Outward Bound and others that they are not for profit and have charitable tax status does not cut. So does the Catholic Church and it is the largest commercial employer in Australia! I know, I used to work in GST in Treasury.

I am happy to address the Committee, but will not be available for 3 weeks from 13 April. I have also advised other former Board members of the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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