



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON CLIMATE CHANGE,
ENVIRONMENT AND WATER**

(Reference: [Inquiry into current and potential ecotourism
in the ACT and region](#))

Members:

**MS M HUNTER (The Chair)
MS M PORTER (The Deputy Chair)
MR Z SESELJA**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 17 MAY 2012

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms S Salvaneschi (Ph: 6205 0136)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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Amended 9 August 2011

The committee met at 2.01 pm.

DAWES, MR DAVID, Director-General, Economic Development Directorate

HILL, MR IAN, Director, Australian Capital Tourism, Tourism, Events and Sport Division, Economic Development Directorate

O’LEARY, MR SHANE, Executive Director, Tourism, Events and Sport Division, Economic Development Directorate

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon. I declare open this first public hearing for the inquiry into current and potential ecotourism in the ACT and region. I would like to welcome Mr David Dawes, Director-General of the ACT Economic Development Directorate, Mr Shane O’Leary, Executive Director of the directorate’s Tourism, Events and Sport Division, and Mr Ian Hill, Acting Director of Australian Capital Tourism.

I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that is before you on the table. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Mr Dawes: I do.

Mr O’Leary: I do.

Mr Hill: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement, Mr Dawes?

Mr Dawes: I thank the committee for the opportunity to talk about and discuss ecotourism. As the committee is aware, we did put a submission in, and we look forward to discussing that.

Firstly, I would like to talk a little about the fact that last month the ACT government launched the growth, diversification and jobs business development strategy for the ACT. The goal of this strategy is to grow and diversify the private sector. To achieve this objective the strategy has a number of initiatives aligned under three strategic themes: fostering the right business environment, supporting business investment, and accelerating business innovation.

You would be aware that tourism and ecotourism make up a significant contribution to the ACT economy. The tourism industry currently contributes around \$1.3 billion to the ACT economy and is one of the territory’s largest employers. The strategic themes and their associated initiatives will benefit businesses across industry sectors, including tourism.

A specific innovation under the strategy is to create a Canberra brand that defines and projects the Canberra opportunity to the outside world. Brand Canberra will be designed to resonate with a range of stakeholders across our economy and the broader Canberra community and reinforce our clean economy, sustainability and ecotourism credentials and benefits. This is an important step to build our profile and further secure the city’s long-term future as a key regional business and tourism hub.

Likewise the initiatives under fostering the right business environment will assist all businesses, including our tourism providers. Initiatives such as payroll tax reform, reducing red tape and providing business advice and mentoring will establish a foundation that supports business formation, innovation and growth. Canberra has the potential to become a preferred international tourist business investment destination and EDD will work in partnership with the business community and all tiers of government to ensure that that happens.

THE CHAIR: Would anybody else like to add to that opening statement?

Mr O’Leary: The only thing I would add is that Mr Hill is no longer the acting director; he is in fact the Director of Australian Capital Tourism.

THE CHAIR: Congratulations, Mr Hill. Thank you for that opening statement. I will move to the first question. At the outset I want to get some sense of the role that the directorate plays in ecotourism in the ACT. You have spoken about the business strategy and how it fits in with some of those parts of the business strategy. How much of a role do you play or do you envisage that you will play under the business strategy in this particular sector of the economy?

Mr Hill: From our point of view the tourism side is certainly fundamental. As David touched on, tourism is currently worth about \$1.3 billion to the ACT economy and employs about 15,000 people either directly or indirectly in the ACT. So it is a significant player. Our role predominantly is from an Australian Capital Tourism perspective, but there is a wider role within EDD. With the tourism-specific area, it is more on the demand side. We focus quite heavily on the promotional side of the ACT to the nation, to core target markets of Sydney, regional New South Wales and to a lesser degree Victoria, Melbourne. We are starting to do some work more on the international front as well.

Tourism—there are about 1.8 million domestic overnight visitors to the ACT each year. That fluctuates somewhere between 1.7 million and up to two over the last 10 years, but the average is around that 1.8 million domestic overnight visitors.

Nature-based tourism—a slightly broader term than the ecotourism term—makes up about 196,000 of those domestic overnight visitors in terms of their purpose or reason for visiting here. It is a clear plank in the story of Canberra that we are promoting nationally and internationally—probably even more from an international perspective, because international visitation for a nature-based experience of Australia as a whole is something that Tourism Australia pushed very heavily. So we have an opportunity there without doubt.

When we talk about nature-based tourism, as I said, it is a fairly broad definition. I was just talking to our visitor centre staff this morning about this very issue. We field a number of inquiries from people looking for experiences from bushwalking to soft adventure and some of the programs that are run out of Tidbinbilla which are more of an ecotourism flavour. There is a fairly broad level of inquiry from the public around those types of experiences. Obviously the beautiful natural surrounds that we are in makes for a compelling argument to consumers as to why to visit Canberra.

We are obviously known for our national attractions, and the blockbuster exhibitions and those things, without doubt, drive core visitation outcomes. But there is certainly an opportunity, and we are actively promoting around some of the nature-based experiences.

MR SESELJA: On that, of the 196,000 nature-based tourists you talk of, can you give us more of a breakdown of where they go? Are they going to Tidbinbilla? Are they going to the Zoo and Aquarium? What is drawing those visitors and where are they going?

Mr Hill: That data comes from the national visitor survey which is put together by Tourism Research Australia. It does not break it down into point-to-point type places. Anecdotally, it is a raft of those types of places, to be honest. The nature-based bushwalking thing is definitely a key strength.

MR SESELJA: People come here to bushwalk?

Mr Hill: Yes, that is known. Tidbinbilla, Namadgi park and those sorts of places are known as places. Again, that community of travellers are very connected. They understand the best bushwalking places across Australia. Canberra is known for that type of activity. The queries that we tend to handle are often from people who may just be driving through, going, “What is there to do around the nature-based thing?” Sometimes we have a generic inquiry.

The National Zoo and Aquarium is a slightly different type of product and experience. The National Botanic Gardens is another area. There are some of those built environments where there are still nature-based or educational experiences being exchanged between the consumer and our product compared to, say, more bushwalking, fly fishing or those sorts of things within the ACT or the region.

THE CHAIR: Of the \$1.3 billion that tourism brings to Canberra, have you been able to break down in any way what might be attributed to ecotourism and nature-based tourism?

Mr Hill: On the purpose of the visit, approximately a third are for leisure purposes, visiting for leisure; a third for business; and a third for what we describe as VFR, visiting friends and relatives, if you have a function, a birthday or those sorts of things—those sorts of purposes. The breakdown into that nature-outdoor type experience is the 196 that I referred to earlier, but unfortunately we are not in a position to break that down any further ourselves around how many of those exactly go to Tidbinbilla versus the Botanic Gardens or open space recreational areas, because we do not capture that sort of data without some very detailed survey work.

THE CHAIR: I also wanted to explore this issue. Tourism obviously is around attracting people. It is around bringing money into the economy and so forth. But there can be a bit of a tension in this area, particularly if part of your role is to be protecting the environment and so forth. How do you balance those things? And particularly as a directorate, where do you see your main role in all of this?

Mr Dawes: It is like all of these issues. There is a balance as well. What we like to see is the visitation here. We actually are looking at how we work more proactively with a number of the groups. As a directorate, we are starting to meet with a number of the conversation groups. I have had some meetings that are only in their very early stages to look at how we do that.

It is not just about tourism. It is around the communities that live in and around some of these sensitive areas as well. I think that as we go forward with the creation of the Jerrabomberra wetlands and the Mulligans Flat area, they will be key developments. We have been talking to some of the groups there about how we can actually work, how we can run some education programs and how we can leverage off the students that are visiting here as well to upskill them. It is a dialogue that we are entering into, but we still have a long way to go. Those processes are starting to happen.

There are some sensitive issues that we are now actually working through, around the centennial trail for one. We are convening some meetings to have some discussion around that, because that particular trail is fairly important. But also we need to have the right balance of bikes, horses and all that sort of thing that might utilise that trail.

MS PORTER: I have a question that relates to that issue of the balance that Ms Hunter was talking about. It does say that it has been raised, I think, by the commissioner who was talking about the risk that is involved. It is noted that there is potential risk for ecotourism activities. You talk about how you are going to be addressing some of those risks through dialogue with the different groups.

We will be hearing from someone later on I think about licensing of ecotourism activities. I noted in the submission that it talks about people being given longer approval to carry out their activities if they are able to meet those risk challenges. Is that correct? We visited Queensland when we did an inquiry into ecotourism. The planning conference that year did a little tour of ecotourism in Queensland. I know that is very alive and well up there where people can get extended licences of up to 15 years. Are we going down that track? I am not quite sure whether we are or not.

Mr Hill: If I can start a bit more broadly, I think the maturity of the tourism industry nationally and here is happening and the ecotourism opportunity is more clearly understood and the challenges that come with that and the need for sort of minimal impact and good regulation while at the same time sustainability. That is sustainability in every sense of ecotourism.

Accreditation is probably playing a stronger role than it ever has in terms of operators who are accredited and fit within management plans that are designated at a local area. I think that is really a fundamental part of the industry maturing from the tourism visitation angle. It is about making sure that we do have accredited operators who are complying with management plans for particular areas, particularly sensitive areas.

A good example here is Conservation Volunteers Australia. They do a great program out at Tidbinbilla. It is fairly small and fairly niche in its beginnings. But for a tourism promotional body, that type of experience and that type of product is fantastic. It is run by a volunteers group who clearly understand the interpretive nature of the experience for the consumer.

So we look to try and promote projects that are of that ilk. I have a couple of things here that I am happy to table. It is a good example of how we would include it to collaterally promote nature-based experiences. We are trying to encourage food and wine national attractions, great outdoors. Our nature-based things fit into one of those planks. Tidbinbilla by torchlight is one of those sorts of programs that we are keen to support.

THE CHAIR: I just wanted to go to the CBA contract. It is noted that the TAMS CBA contract will not be renewed after the middle of 2012. Is the basis for this decision financial or are there other reasons?

Mr Hill: To be really honest, I am actually not that sure as to the nature of that particular agreement. What I do know is that the trial has been working positively from our perspective. I could not really answer that one on behalf of TAMS, to be honest.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to take that on notice, Mr Dawes?

Mr Dawes: We will take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: The submission talks about recommending a trial period for new ecotourism activities and operations. Was there a specific period of time that had been thought about or was it your intention that the period would vary, depending on the activity, the operation and so forth?

Mr Hill: I suspect it is a lot more of the latter. It depends on the type of operator and the type of product and experience they are looking to put together and package together. Some of those things might have greater implications than others. I think there is some flexibility there to look at what some of those impacts may or may not be.

THE CHAIR: And that sits in your area, Mr Hill?

Mr Hill: No, it does not. We sit on the demand side of promotion. The regulation side sits elsewhere.

Mr Dawes: We will be working with the other agencies to provide some support from an economic perspective, but we will be working with the other agency. The particular agency would be TAMS, who manage the parks. It will come back to ensuring that everyone can be satisfied—not only the community groups—that these nature parks are being preserved for future generations. I think that is the important thing. It is being done quite successfully in other areas. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. We can actually be learning some of the experiences that are occurring in Queensland, which I think is one of the leaders as well.

THE CHAIR: I was just trying to get a sense, if there was going to be a trial period, of who takes carriage of new activities—which directorate and which area of the directorate.

Mr Dawes: That would be TAMS.

THE CHAIR: It would be TAMS?

Mr Dawes: Yes. They would take that activity on because they provide the licences and manage those facilities.

THE CHAIR: There was an ACT nature-based tourism strategy that was produced in 2000, which is quite some time ago now. Is it still alive and well or has it been put to one side? If it is still operating, which directorate or which area of government has involvement with it?

Mr Hill: We started a new strategic planning process that covers, essentially, 2009 through to 2013—a five-year strategic plan for Australian Capital Tourism. There is mention of sectoral plans within that strategy. That is the strategy we are working to at the moment. That covers both domestic and, to some degree, some international activity that we are looking at wrapping up now, particularly on the aviation front.

Going to your point, the plan from 2000 is not something we have cross-referenced specifically in our plan. As I alluded to earlier, the nature-based experience is something that we have incorporated into the whole of the ACT's brand from a tourism perspective.

MR SESELJA: There are a few things I want to explore. One is how the government works amongst its various agencies. If we are talking about attracting people to nature-based tourism, hiking is one of the things that are mentioned. Namadgi is a good place to hike and I get out there a fair bit. There is a bit of a lack of information, often, when you are hiking. There is not a lot of signage that tells you how far you are from particular destinations and the like. It can be very vague. I am interested, from a tourism perspective, in how you coordinate with the relevant agencies that put up the signs and so on. It is okay for locals who get to know the area, but it can be difficult, I think, if you go in there and you do not know the area.

What work is being done to address that? Has there been feedback around those kinds of issues?

Mr Hill: Signage is a constant issue, I think, in the tourism world, whether it be here or in any other jurisdiction. Certainly, the liaison between our organisation and people like the TAMS Directorate is pretty solid. We have some people in our industry development team who look at signage from the tourist's perspective rather than, say, from the general public's perspective. There is interpretive signage, directional signage and signage about distances from here to here to make sure there is some safety around issues of point to point. We provide input to that process. We would bring a tourist perspective rather than a pure signage perspective. That has been working quite well from our end. Jonathan Kobus is our representative in our industry development team who liaises on those sorts of issues.

MR SESELJA: In some parts you will get some signage. I hiked up to Mount Franklin and there is a lot of signage there. But we went on a day when there was a metre deep of snow, so we had to get the snow off the signage, but the signage was telling us all about how with climate change there was going to be less snow. It was a

little bit ironic; the kids thought that was pretty funny. It was interesting information, but it was not particularly useful for a hiker.

A lot was put into that kind of information but not exactly where you are and those sorts of things. Likewise, there is a brand-new building of some sort at the bottom of Mount Franklin. People hiking in snow really need some shelter and there is not a lot of shelter that goes with it. It is a beautiful thing, with a beautiful deck and all sorts of things. I guess what I am interested in is how much coordination there is to make sure these things are useful rather than maybe just beautiful or interesting or whatever.

Mr Hill: It is certainly a valid point and we will continue to liaise closely with TAMS on that. They are implementing the actual signage, way out and information. Probably the other area where we play an active role is through our visitors centre. We stock a lot of information around maps, guided walks written by specialist people, guides for Namadgi and the like in the ACT region. Some of that information dissemination certainly sits with us and the visitors centre, which tracks approximately 220,000 people a year who go through that centre on Northbourne Avenue. We do stock a range of information provided by third parties around great walks and great hikes within the ACT and region. I think technology is starting to play a role there too. There are some applications that have been developed, provided you can get reception and those sorts of things.

MR SESELJA: It is tough in parts of Namadgi.

Mr Hill: There is a risk there, obviously, but certainly technology is playing a role in pre-trip planning and I think that is another important aspect for us to be focusing on.

MR SESELJA: You talk about technology. On the Tidbinbilla side of things it mentions a comprehensive website. I have not checked for a little while, for some time probably, the websites around Namadgi and the hikes and stuff. Has that been upgraded recently? When I last looked at it, which was some time ago, it was not all that useful in giving a lot of trip information. Has work been put into making that more user friendly?

Mr Hill: I will have to take that one on notice; I am not 100 per cent sure. Like you, I have not checked it recently. But the digital world generally is certainly an area of focus for us. It is a great tool for improving people's mobility in and around Canberra, not just in the non-built environment but even within the built environment and our roundabouts. It is something I can take on notice and feed back through.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: Could we talk a little bit more about this idea of brand Canberra and what we are doing at the moment. I realise that this is being developed right now. What do we say about Canberra that makes people out there in the other cities, country towns or overseas realise that they have this wonderful resource here that they can utilise? That is the first thing. Then what do you think the brand Canberra will do to enhance that?

Mr Dawes: With the brand Canberra and the work that we have been doing, we have

been working again very closely with industry organisations. We have run a number of focus groups again because the whole idea is not just about a logo; it is around how we engage with the broader community, both domestic and international, but more importantly domestically, to try and separate the image of decisions that are being made in Canberra that sometimes are unpalatable for the rest of the country.

This work is being led by one of the leading consultants to initiate the initial work which will feed into further work. There have been a number of focus groups that have covered virtually all of the sectors of the business community in Canberra but also the educational institutions. That is something that Shane O’Leary has been directly running and involved in. He might like to expand a little bit on that, but it is early, at the infancy stage.

Mr O’Leary: Ms Porter, everything that David said is absolutely correct. Over the past several months we have done some foundation work that has been funded out of the Economic Development Directorate. As we embark on this, we certainly see that the centenary is going to be a great opportunity for there to be a national and international focus on Canberra the city, certainly its history and also its place in modern Australia. Of course, as sure as the centenary will come, it will go. We see the opportunity that it provides for a legacy in the future as one that should not be missed.

As David mentioned, we have engaged with all areas of the community in the conduct of focus groups. We believe that it is important as an exercise that it is not seen as being exclusively something of government for government, that it is something for which we seek buy-in, have sought buy-in and have had buy-in from all areas of the community, including all areas of the business community, as David mentioned—media, sport, the arts, science, research, education, the Australian government, and on it goes.

We have also canvassed the views of interests outside the ACT in shaping the direction of the project—again, the importance of how Canberra is perceived not only outside the territory but how Canberrans see it. What has emerged in this foundation piece of work is that Canberra does need to assert its place as the nation’s capital for all Australians. It is very exciting. As David mentioned, it is early days. But as an exercise as we count down towards the centenary, it is a very important one.

Touching on the subject of this hearing, Canberra in and of itself certainly is an eco-city. With respect to the role that ecotourism can play in shaping the perceptions—perhaps, better said, reshaping the current perceptions—that are held regarding Canberra, most of us would be aware that Robyn Archer’s recent presentation to the National Press Club obtained a lot of interest right around the country. It is exactly those sorts of perceptions that the branding exercise seeks to address.

MS PORTER: Just by way of a comment, one of the things that people most identify with is Canberra being a bush capital. They talk about not wanting to lose the flavour of their bush capital. Whenever we talk about urban infill or whatever else we might be talking about, it is always this bush capital idea that people identify with. When you go outside Canberra, people identify the federal parliament and think that that is Canberra and nothing else happens here. I think there are some big challenges ahead of you for this branding of Canberra. I hope you do very well.

THE CHAIR: I want to go back to your submission. You mention in the submission that an investigation of the Canberra nature park by the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment highlighted nine areas affected by visitor use. From the perspective of the directorate, what do you see as the solutions to some of these matters?

Mr Hill: I think some of the solutions are very much around the dialogue and the sharing of information. That is probably one of the critical bits that need to happen. Again the accreditation is something that we are very focused on, and tourism more broadly across the country is. There is a new program called T-QUAL, which is part of a broader Tourism Australia 2020 strategy around the growth of tourism for Australia, and that includes both inbound and domestic tourism.

One of the planks of that plan is very much around accreditation in T-QUAL. There is a raft of accreditation programs that sit out there, from AAA ratings to ecotourism ratings. We are keen to see more of a one-stop shop for tourism operators and for the consumer to understand what accreditation actually means, so that accreditation is not the logo that is stuck on something without some meaning and without some criteria, and without those criteria being met by operators. So we are looking for a sustainable tourism operator working through an accredited system, and that is where our focus is in terms of some of these responses that you have alluded to.

THE CHAIR: Also on page 5 of your submission you mention the endangered species breeding programs out at Tidbinbilla. Is there any concern that higher numbers of people in areas like Tidbinbilla would further threaten species? Obviously there are breeding programs; they have to go back out into the park. Is there any concern there or is there any sort of plan in place about how to ensure that the good work that is done is then not undone?

Mr Hill: Certainly from our perspective a robust management plan that has tourism as part of the solution, not part of the problem, is really critical. I alluded to the maturing of the tourism industry generally around ecotourism. I think sustainable operators understand that, and they understand how it impacts. It is not in their interest to have high impact activities going on that create community concerns or have a negative impact on potential breeding programs. Again the accreditation is probably the key to unlocking that in a way that is sustainable. So sustainable operators and sound business practices within a management plan framework are things that we would encourage. I am not sure we are at the point at the moment where we are being inundated with people and that it is a problem, but obviously proactive management is critical to ensure that we do not get into that situation down the track.

Mr Dawes: Could I just add that I think the crucial part of it, as Mr Hill has alluded to, is the accreditation and the enforcement. That is going to be the crucial part of it as well. You would hope that once they have been through that accreditation, they do take the contract seriously and actually manage those activities in an appropriate way, because obviously, with any significant investment that they make, they could put that at risk. So it does come back to the way that is enforced.

THE CHAIR: Moving to Namadgi—Mr Seselja touched on Namadgi before—what

is the role of the directorate regarding the Namadgi national park management plan, the one from 2010?

Mr Hill: Our role is again a bit more advisory at this point in time. Again, Jonathan Kobus from our industry development team sits around the table or around some of those discussions in terms of what would make up some of that management plan. But it is not something that we actively are driving ourselves. We are certainly contributing to it. That is probably the best way I could put it.

THE CHAIR: You also mention that Namadgi at the moment has less developed facilities than Tidbinbilla. Is there a plan to enhance the facilities out at Namadgi or is that not on the cards at the moment?

Mr Dawes: To my knowledge, no. I would have to take that on notice just to double-check. That would be something that would be handled out of another area; it would be TAMS's responsibility. But we can take that on notice. At the end of the day, one of the key things, as we are getting more and more involved in some of these areas, is that we are looking at those opportunities that present themselves for tourism, and then that is when we can help, assist and guide, and be involved in some of the committees to establish and turn some of those opportunities into reality and again an asset. Again, all of these things have to be done sensitively. Obviously, it is going to be crucial that they are sustainable for the long term.

THE CHAIR: You did explain that the new commercial tour operators in Namadgi will be subject to the one-year trial, which we touched on before, the one-year period before being granted longer term licences. How will their performance be assessed? How will you figure out whether they have done a satisfactory job or stayed within whatever guidelines have been set down? Is there a process in place or is that being developed?

Mr Dawes: We are not controlling that particular project. We just highlighted it in our submission. That is something that—I apologise—the other directorate is responsible for. But they would have the usual terms and conditions about how they have exercised control, how they have actually engaged, how they have maintained and all of that, which would be a standard agreement.

THE CHAIR: As you are pretty much representing people right across directorates in this hearing, would you be able to take that on notice for us.

Mr Dawes: Yes.

THE CHAIR: That would be very useful.

MS PORTER: Can I just ask the same question on notice. If there is a plan for how long “long term” will be, what does that actually mean? It is a carrot and stick approach, isn't it, saying, “You have to abide by this, and if you don't you will suffer consequences; however, if you do, there is an opportunity for you to have a long-term licence”? I think that does seem to work in other jurisdictions so it is obviously a good way to go. I just want to know if there is a staged process. Maybe there is a medium-sized thing. It might be like the three bears in Goldilocks—a small one, a medium-

sized one and a very large licence.

THE CHAIR: I did have another question, and again you may need to take this on notice because it may well sit within TAMS. When TAMS, or whichever directorate or area of government it is, looked at different accreditation and certification of programs that you were referring to earlier, did they look at the relative merits of different types—say the Ecotourism Australia accreditation, the eco certification that I know that Tidbinbilla has, for instance? You may be able to answer it, Mr Hill, but I am just wondering what other systems are out there, whether you had a look at them and what you think the merits are.

Mr Hill: Certainly within the T-QUAL broader framework that tourism nationally is embracing, I think there are something like 25 different accreditation programs for different elements of tourism. All of those were looked at very thoroughly. There are a number that relate to an ecotourism component. To be honest, our review is very much around trying to pick the best of those things rather than the lowest common denominator. If that T-QUAL tick is not worth anything to the consumer, there is no value in it at all.

So there has been a very thorough review. It was undertaken nationally with people like Simon Currant, who is a major investor in ecotourism down in Tasmania. He has operations down there from Strahan right through to Cradle Mountain. He has been actively championing the T-QUAL national project. I think he was down here just recently for a tourism symposium where he talked about T-QUAL.

I can certainly come back to you with a little more information about the specific number of ecotourism accreditation programs within T-QUAL but I do know they were looked at in a fairly comprehensive way.

THE CHAIR: So you will be able to bring back further information to us?

Mr Hill: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that.

MR SESELJA: I am interested in how the government is working with the private sector in the nature-based tourism space, the ecotourism space. Even in the submission there are obviously a couple of private sector organisations. One of them is the zoo. One of them is R.E.A.L Fun Adventures and Naturewise tours. But there is not much particularly if we look to our region—if we look, say, to Namadgi—in terms of a space for private sector operators looking at bringing tourists in, looking to show them our natural surroundings. I am interested in what strategies there are in place to encourage that and what restrictions there are in place at the moment in terms of organisations having a presence in Namadgi and other places in the region.

Mr Hill: There are a couple of facets to that. Firstly, we are probably not being inundated with requests along that line. So there is a bit of chicken and egg around it, to be honest. The other bit is that from a broader investment perspective with the private sector, there has only recently been an announcement by Tourism Australia, which we are a part of, to do with Austrade offices around the globe.

There are eight Austrade offices in particular that are being geared up over the next five years to look at attracting tourism investment with tourism opportunities in Australia. The ACT is part of that. We are in that funnel of attracting investment to potential opportunities here. Stromlo forest park is probably a good example where there is an opportunity for some further development that will bring in some nature-based activities.

Taking that to market widely is something that Austrade is working with Tourism Australia and ourselves on. That is more of a supply side issue than a demand side issue that we traditionally work in. But there is also the benefit of working in the EDD framework that we now exist in, which is matching some of this investment to opportunities here.

There is now a process through which to do that. There is also the benefit of working in the EDD framework that we now exist in, which is matching some of this investment to opportunities here. There is now a process through which to do that.

MR SESELJA: So on that second part—the restrictions—what are the sort of restrictions? Obviously, we look around the country and some of our most beautiful wilderness areas have lodges and various things where people set up in a complementary way to allow people to experience that. We do not have that here. That might be a demand thing, but I am interested in whether there are constraints on that kind of activity and what the nature of them is. Are you working, I guess, to assist businesses if they are interested in navigating those constraints?

Mr Dawes: As part and parcel of our delivering the economic development business strategy the other week, as well as part and parcel of some of the focus groups we conducted, these were some of the issues that have come out of those focus groups. As well, that leads into some of the other issues we are looking at around red tape. We are further exploring that. I think part and parcel of that whole strategy is to look at how we can innovate, how we can actually encourage a broader revenue base to the territory.

Obviously, we believe that tourism has an opportunity to grow. So we are exploring some of those things. Actually, you will recall that there was quite a bit of work done just after the bushfires around some of those ecotourism opportunities. So we are in the process of revisiting those and working with operators and the broader business community to see how we can turn some of those into reality.

As we work through some of those, some of the constraints will emerge that we need to work with across government. I think that is one of the reasons why the Economic Development Directorate was really established. It was to try and get all of those like-minded economic activities into one directorate but then to work more closely with some of the other directorates to try to break down some of those barriers. That is a work in progress and that will be something that will be done over the next 12 months.

MR SESELJA: But in principle does the government have any objection, say, to those kind of opportunities being pursued in Namadgi? If the environmental issues can be dealt with, does the government in principle support those kind of activities

taking place in Namadgi if the case can be made?

Mr Dawes: If the case can be made and obviously there are all the protections around the environment and all of that, there would not be any objection at all. It is something that we would certainly encourage as well but we are working through and developing some of that.

MR SESELJA: You mentioned Ginninderra Falls. Are you able to give us an update on the status? I have had questions occasionally from people about Ginninderra Falls and where that is up to. That used to be quite a destination but it has been closed, I understand—I have not been there for some time—and remains closed. Is that the case?

Mr Hill: I will have to take that one on notice to get more detail, to be honest. It is not something that is at the forefront with us at the moment.

THE CHAIR: Probably the latest question on that would be where the discussions are up to between the Chief Minister, the newly formed Ginninderra park group and the New South Wales government.

Mr Dawes: I was going to suggest that we would take that on notice and ask for some inquiries from TAMS.

THE CHAIR: That would be great. I believe there was going to be some sort of meeting and follow-up.

I have a couple more questions. On page 8 you mention that the total visitation to Tidbinbilla reached 220,000 in 2011-12. How does this compare to the previous year's visitation rates?

Mr Hill: I am sorry; I do not have that data on me but I can certainly check.

THE CHAIR: If you could take that on notice that would be great. The other part of that is if there has been a growth—this question is based on an assumption that there has been growth—how that has been dealt with within the Tidbinbilla plan of management.

Mr Hill: I will take that on notice.

THE CHAIR: You may need to take these ones on notice too as they may be slightly out of your directorate. In 2010-11 the environment and sustainability commissioner investigated a proposal around ecotourism ventures in Tidbinbilla and recommended that a comprehensive policy for commercial operations on land zoned as national parks be developed. The first question is: what was the government's response to that recommendation and is the policy being developed?

The commissioner also recommended a need for greater community education around the appropriate use of nature reserves including in the context of ecotourism activities, so the question is: what efforts have been made to ensure that this recommendation is implemented?

Mr Dawes: I will take that on notice. That is work that would be undertaken by another directorate and we will endeavour to get back to you.

THE CHAIR: We have put a few questions on notice to you there, but our understanding as a committee was that there was going to be the one submission and that officials from the one directorate would be here. Thank you for appearing this afternoon. Of course we will be getting the *Hansard* and that will be sent to you. If you see any errors, please let the secretary know. Again, thank you for the time you have given to the inquiry.

Meeting adjourned from 2.46 to 3.16 pm.

NEIL, MR ROBERT, Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

POWER, DR AILEEN, Senior Manager, Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the inquiry into current and potential ecotourism in the ACT and region. Just to correct the record of *Hansard*, before I said that the officials appearing before us—Mr David Dawes, Mr Shane O’Leary and Mr Ian Hill—were the only government officials. Of course, the minister, Simon Corbell—the Minister for the Environment and Sustainable Development—the directorate and officials will be appearing before the inquiry next week. We will have questions to that directorate that we will ask again. I would ask Mr Dawes to follow up on the TAMS questions that he took on notice. I am sure the committee secretary will follow up on that.

I welcome Mr Robert Neil, the ACT Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment, and Dr Aileen Power, the Senior Manager of the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliament privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement before you on the table. Could you please confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Neil: Yes.

Dr Power: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Mr Neil, would you like to start with an opening statement?

Mr Neil: Certainly. Thank you for the opportunity to address the committee. Our written submission indicated that we thought that well-planned, well-managed ecotourism opportunities exist provided they are complementary to the natural and cultural values of our reserve system. We have had some work done around the reserve system, not specifically tourism. One particular complaint was related to, I think, our tourism venture in Tidbinbilla nature reserve. We have had a look at that and provided some recommendations on how it may be improved. The state of the environment reports and the report into the Canberra nature park also hint at a little bit more community engagement and the value of our reserve and park systems, which we believe should be utilised more often.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I want to start on that because in 2010-11, as you said, your office investigated a proposal on ecotourism ventures in Tidbinbilla and recommended that a comprehensive policy for commercial operations on land zoned as national parks be developed. Have you had a government response to that recommendation?

Mr Neil: Not specifically to that recommendation, other than to say that they have accepted the recommendations. There are four recommendations that came out of that report. Initial feedback from the directorates is that they have accepted the recommendations and they are implementing them. You may be aware that in our annual report we would normally report against government responses to

recommendations, implemented or otherwise. This year we have taken a slightly different approach. We are actually auditing some of those responses, and Tidbinbilla nature reserve is one of those. Hopefully by the end of this financial year, ready for the annual report, we will have a more comprehensive response.

THE CHAIR: Will that also include the recommendation about greater community education around appropriate use?

Mr Neil: Yes.

THE CHAIR: We will look forward to seeing what your audit brings out. On page 3 of your submission you make the comment that if the ecocertification run by Ecotourism Australia is valuable, it should be mandatory for operators in the ACT to be certified. You say “if it is valuable”. Do you have any views one way or the other on the ecocertification process?

Mr Neil: No, only that we were aware that that was one of the certification mechanisms. I am not aware of any others. The committee has probably heard that there are plenty, but we were not aware. So that was the reason for that comment. If that is valuable and if it does work, that would be reasonable to use as the yardstick for tourism operators.

Dr Power: Just to add to the commissioner’s comment, the qualification of that particular comment was also around the need for care when relying on such a mechanism, and not just to assume that those certification processes that are already in place are in fact sufficient to be able to guarantee in any sense the security and the outcomes that the office would be looking for.

THE CHAIR: I think we did hear in earlier evidence that there are quite a few different processes and certificates. On the last page of your submission you make the suggestion that linkages be developed with community environmental groups such as Parkcare and Landcare. Could we hear some more about what you have in mind here? Were you suggesting linkages between government and community groups or linkages between ecotourism operators and community groups? Or was it all of the groups?

Mr Neil: I would say all three. What came out in one of the recommendations—I think it might have been recommendation 1—from the report on the Canberra nature parks was this need. There is a wide variety of interested groups but they never seem to be able to get together collectively. It would be beneficial to organise a forum where all of these groups get together, have their say, have their input, and it is a better mechanism I think for government because they have all the players in the place at one time. I would suggest that it would be all three, if and when the tourism operators express an interest in becoming part of that sort of forum.

Dr Power: Again, if I could just add one other thought, one of the standout items from the recent ACT state of the environment reporting exercise was just how much valuable information is held within the community environmental groups, particularly. We are well aware of the academic and research institutions that we have in the ACT, but sometimes I think we could overlook the fact of how much knowledge is held

within the community and the status of that knowledge. That is a key sentiment that was really informing that recommendation.

MS PORTER: Would you see that as an annual kind of conference-type thing where people would come together annually to share information and update one another on what they were doing if they had not already done so during the year—and make some recommendations for ways forward? Is that your vision?

Mr Neil: Yes. The recommendation was to hold a biennial nature reserves forum. There are Parkcare and conservation groups. There is a recreational users group. But some of those groups are not represented on that. The general feeling was that if you could get them all together you would have a far larger representation of community values and some of the ideas that they have about how the reserve should be managed.

MS PORTER: The government submission mentions the Australian reptile park, and that is a group that crosses over between being a quasi-commercial operator and—it is in fact—very much a volunteer not-for-profit group; that is my understanding. I do not think they have any government funding at all. They are actually utilising volunteers in that operation; that is my understanding. That is a group that will probably be able to come and share their expertise in reptiles—endangered species and identification of species in the ACT.

Mr Neil: I think that is right. They are the groups that are missing.

MS PORTER: That are missing, yes.

Mr Neil: Just missing from the general recreational users groups. As Dr Power said, there are a huge amount of individuals out there with enormous knowledge.

MS PORTER: It is my understanding that they do a lot of education work with school groups.

Mr Neil: Yes, they do.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned the commission's investigation into the Canberra nature park. Nine areas were highlighted that were being affected by visitor use. This was picked up in the government's submission as well. It mentioned a number of sites across the ACT. There was Mount Pleasant, Mount Ainslie, Mount Majura, the Pinnacle and so forth. There were a number anyway across the ACT. It did mention some of the potential risks or impacts. There were horses; I suppose mountain bikes going through; certainly tracks from vehicles and bikes; weeds; and dumping of rubbish. They were some of the things that were picked up there. From your perspective is this around the numbers of people that are visiting these places or is it more to do with the behaviour of people once they are in these places?

Mr Neil: The number will clearly increase as our population increases. So we need to accept that that will be the case. I suspect it is more around the activities. Some would be just visitor numbers where people basically wear a track going to a nice lookout, for example. Where you have mountain bikes, where they establish a track, I think that is a little different in that there is the potential for degradation, erosion and all the

things that attach to it because of its continuing use. Once you have a few people doing it, people tend to think it is okay because it is a well-worn track. Part of the recommendations in those reports were also about signage in our reserves, so that people know what they are, what their values are and how to respect them. So I think it is more the activities than the number.

THE CHAIR: Do you have a comment on the signage? Mr Seselja raised this issue about signage in Namadgi before. Has this been something you have received reports or complaints on? Have you at any time had a bit of a look at the level of signage and the information that is provided?

Mr Neil: Certainly it was picked up in the report on nature parks, so it is clearly an issue. This could just be anecdotal but if you talk to some of the park managers and reserve managers, they would probably suggest that, if people knew the rules, that would be a little more helpful. Innocent, unintended consequences from someone who thinks it is okay to ride a bike and they ride every day—that kind of thing. If there was a sign that said, “Here’s the values, here’s what you should do, not what you shouldn’t do,” I think that would be very helpful. Each park and each reserve is likely to have a different value and a different set of circumstances to the next.

Dr Power: It is also a clear example of the way we need to balance change of activities within nature parks and reserves with both monitoring and educative processes. As activities change, you cannot just develop a plan and allow a particular activity in there without there being a whole raft of strategies around monitoring and education, to go along with those.

MS PORTER: As you said, there are models of accreditation and licensing around Australia. You were saying you were concerned, Dr Power, that unless they keep a very close eye on it, they can use that opportunity of having accreditation to carry out activities which may not be desirable if no-one is monitoring them. Did I hear you say that correctly?

Dr Power: My meaning was that if we or any agency are going to use a particular accreditation program as the basis for developing or allowing particular activities, we need to do our best to ensure that that process of accreditation is comprehensive and is suitable to the activities and, what is more, is updated as situations change. We all know that the world is not static, so that needs to be revisited and checked to make sure that those processes are still relevant and appropriate to their intended purpose.

MS PORTER: When the previous witnesses were here we were discussing some different models. I made mention, as did some of the witnesses, of the Queensland system, where it is very much involving the groups in making sure they are taking care of the environment so that their accreditation or their licensing is dependent on them achieving outcomes as far as the protection of the environment is concerned. It is an interesting model because they have to prove what they are doing in protecting the environment in order to get their licence extended, and sometimes for a considerable length of time.

Mr Neil: I think that is a very valid way of approaching it. It is easy enough to set up an accreditation system, but it is only as good as the people who comply with it. Some

form of monitoring needs to be done. Actually, it sounds very good.

MS PORTER: I have not looked at it for quite a while on the ground, but it was very impressive when I visited it with the planning committee last time. They had a conference up there on that particular subject. Going back to the signage, if I may, quickly. Mr Seselja might have something on that. I think it is important that the signs are there, obviously, and people are informed and know what to do and what not to do. You are saying, “Don’t tell them what they are not supposed to do,” but from my point of view, having had experience in one of the local nature parks near where I live, some activities were happening that everybody thought were okay. The signs were there, but they did not actually show the areas where they were not allowed to do those things. They only said where they were allowed. I think once people got in there and decided that an activity was okay on a particular track, they did not understand that it was not okay on other tracks that were nearby. There was a complete misunderstanding by well-intentioned people who thought that they could continue the activity beyond the designated track that was marked because nothing said, “Don’t do that in this particular area,” particularly as they saw, as you suggested, other people there previously who had been doing the same activity. They felt that it was okay. So I think signage is extremely important. Mr Seselja might have something more to say about that. He may have questions he wants to ask you about that.

MR SESELJA: No.

Mr Neil: In response to Ms Porter, the reason I said having signs that tell you what you can do rather than what you cannot do was more just a reflection of, I guess, my personal views. I always think it is better if you can provide the positive rather than the negative, but I acknowledge that in many circumstances the “don’t do” sign is sometimes more effective.

MS PORTER: As a parent, I agree. I think that always the message should be positive, but sometimes you need the other as well.

THE CHAIR: You also mentioned in your submission that a lot of what goes on in the ACT is self-guided—it is just people heading out and going for a bushwalk in Namadgi or whatever—and also the importance of putting together guides, codes or that information, which may not just be through signs but distributed in other ways. Have you been involved in any further discussions with any government agencies about that? Have you got an idea of what is already provided and whether it is sufficient at the moment or needs to be enhanced?

Mr Neil: No, we have not had—or I have not had—any discussions around those things. As the plans of management are actually looked at more closely and you start to get to the fine grain of what policies should be implemented and what should not, I would expect that that is where you would see that kind of information. As to the Alps example and leaving no trace, that is a really strong, powerful message. If that is the kind of message that we can get to the people who use our reserves, that would be a very good outcome.

THE CHAIR: It was probably more something that you want to get across with the Canberra nature park in our urban areas. Probably people who go walking in Namadgi

understand that quite well. It is people who are going and walking up Mount Taylor or Mount Ainslie and then leaving rubbish behind that are probably more of an issue.

Mr Neil: Yes.

MR SESELJA: I am interested in opportunities at Namadgi and how the Namadgi national park management plan can be flexible enough so that we can see some tourism in the area. One of the things it says is that commercial tour operators will not be permitted to establish permanent camps, bases or storage areas in the park. Why is that? Is that not something that can co-exist, and does co-exist, in other national parks—that there are permanent facilities which allow people to experience these national parks without particularly damaging the environment?

Mr Neil: The actual content to that is something that the government will need to respond to because it is their policy. But you are right: there are other examples where they have permanent facilities put in place. As I said earlier, well-managed, well-planned ecotourism that is complementary to the natural and cultural values of our reserve system offer enormous opportunities for not just the ACT but the region more broadly. I think they should be supported.

MR SESELJA: I think one of the principles of ecotourism is that you give people the opportunity to experience nature and get an appreciation for it and then hopefully that leaves them with a desire to look after it. Do you see then that we can, I guess, better utilise it? I certainly have a personal view, and I share it, that Namadgi is an untapped resource, not in any sense of trying to plunder it but in the sense that we do not get out there into it enough, partly because there really are no complementary facilities, or very few complementary facilities, to allow people to experience it. I guess that is what I would like to see. I am interested in your thoughts on how this committee can recommend or how governments might have policies which encourage the kind of tourism that allows people to appreciate it and help it to be protected.

Mr Neil: There are probably a couple of things in that, Mr Seselja. One would be about—and it is put forward in recommendations from state of the environment reports and reports into the reserves, and even looking at Tidbinbilla—community engagement on a broader basis. You would have to put that caveat on any use. I would just repeat what I have said: well-managed, well-constructed, well-presented, well-monitored activities that are complementary to the values of those places should be encouraged.

Dr Power: An additional thought on looking at the opportunities that are offered within various nature parks, particularly within the ACT: as you would be aware, more than half of the ACT is nature park or open space, green space, but they are considerably different in character and what they have to offer. So I think we do need to be careful when we talk about the opportunities that are available that we talk fairly specifically around particular locations rather than slipping into making a general statement about access and opportunities across the board. If we do not do that, we will tend to forget the particular ecology, social, cultural values that attend to each of those different types of space.

Mr Neil: I think what Aileen is saying is that, whilst you can have a broad policy, you

need the fine-grained information policies and actions for the individual reserves because they are quite different.

THE CHAIR: I have asked this of our previous witnesses and I wondered if you had a comment on it. It is about the threatened species breeding programs that are being undertaken at Tidbinbilla. Do you have any concern that an increasing number of visitors may pose a threat to these programs, because obviously these species are being reintroduced back into the park?

Mr Neil: Yes, I would have concerns and I would expect that those who are managing those breeding programs would share those concerns. I refer to Dr Murray Evans here; if there was any impact on his frogs he would be the first to raise the red flag. To some extent I think we need to acknowledge that the expertise of the people who are breeding the threatened species is in that line. My view is that if you thought there was a problem you would go to those people and ask them, because they are the experts. In answer to your question, yes, I am concerned, but I think that, while ever the people who are managing the breeding programs have control of whether or not you get access or do not get access, that would be appropriate.

THE CHAIR: So you are not aware at the moment how those things fit together, how the work of the breeding program is taken into account in the Tidbinbilla management plan as far as opening up new trails or—

Mr Neil: No, I do not know.

THE CHAIR: We will pursue that. Thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon. *Hansard* will be coming out and if you do see any errors could you please let our secretary know. Other than that, thank you for giving your time to this inquiry.

Mr Neil: Thank you, and just on a final note I would like to thank Sam for her work and her engagement with us. It has been very helpful and I think she is a wonderful asset to the committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

CHEATHAM, MS KYM, Chief Executive Officer, Ecotourism Australia

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, Ms Cheatham. Thank you very much for agreeing to provide evidence to the committee this afternoon via teleconference. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege. I understand you have seen the privilege statement which was sent to you.

Ms Cheatham: Yes, I have.

THE CHAIR: Could you please confirm that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Cheatham: Yes, I do understand the parliamentary privilege statement.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to start by providing an opening statement?

Ms Cheatham: Just as a way of introduction, I am the chief executive of Ecotourism Australia. Ecotourism Australia is a national, not-for-profit industry association that is focused on development and support for the ecotourism, sustainable tourism, nature-based tourism industry in Australia. This organisation was formed 21 years ago and was one of the first ecotourism organisations in the world. In 1996 we developed and launched the first environmental certification for the tourism industry in the world. That certification program is now recognised by the UN sponsored Global Sustainable Tourism Council and we are one of only 10 organisations in the world who are recognised for their environmental certification for the tourism industry. So I guess that positions us as an organisation that is certainly at the forefront in the world when it comes to ecotourism, particularly certification and recognition of standards for the ecotourism, sustainable tourism and nature tourism industries.

MS HUNTER: Thank you. You did send us the strategic discussion paper; thank you for that and that will be included as an exhibit for this inquiry. I did notice in the front of that paper that it refers to Ecotourism Australia managing the ECO certification program, the respecting our culture program, climate action and EcoGuide certification programs. Could you give us a bit of a rundown of those three programs?

Ms Cheatham: Yes. The ecotourism certification was the first program that we started in 1996. It used to be called the national tourism accreditation program and was renamed in 2003. It is a triple bottom line program so we are looking for economic business management criteria, environmental management criteria and also community social sustainability, so how the tourism operators deal in their community. It is a program that has the most tourism operators who have participated in that program and it is focused on a full nature base, so to achieve ecotourism certification 50 per cent of the experience has to be nature based. As I said, that is the program that most of our operators are involved in.

That certification is recognised by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and we have what was at the time a world first in a partnership agreement. It was not a memorandum of understanding but we have a deed of agreement with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and their recognition of operators who have achieved ecotourism and advanced ecotourism certification and then providing 15-

year permits as opposed to six-year permits. So that was a breakthrough agreement seven years ago with them in the recognition of the triple bottom line best practice of the operators who had achieved that certification.

The respecting our culture program is for Indigenous tourism. Aboriginal Tourism Australia developed this certification when they were in operation and developed it in consultation with Indigenous people around the country. It is a certification based on authentic, credible Indigenous tourism experiences. We were invited to take that program over in 2008 when Aboriginal Tourism Australia lost a substantial amount of funding and ceased to exist.

We have some operators who have taken on the ROC program in addition to ECO. We have turned ROC into a triple bottom line program as well. Both ECO and ROC were pilot programs in the national tourism accreditation program by the federal government and were two of the three accreditation programs that were recognised at the launch of the T-QUAL tick in April last year at the Australian Tourism Exchange by the federal government. So we have been at the forefront of the national tourism accreditation framework process as well.

The climate action certification we started in 2008. That was in response to concerns around climate change and that is open to all types of tourism operators, not just nature based. We have restaurants, accommodation, transport operators, limo hire companies and all kinds of different tourism operators who have done the climate action certification.

The EcoGuide was the second certification program we started after our primary program, which was ecotourism certification. The EcoGuide is held by an individual and it is an individual recognition of not only a guide's legal requirements—first aid certificates, workplace health and safety issues and group management issues—but also their ability to interpret the natural environment and the quality of the interpretation they give about the natural environment to the guests, the visitors, that they are taking. That is an overview of those four programs.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. Are you aware of how many operators, programs, organisations or individuals within the ACT have one of these certifications?

Ms Cheatham: We have only one certified operator within the ACT and that is Tidbinbilla.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that. Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: I have a question about the ECO certification. You talked about the 15-year licensing certification that is happening with the Barrier Reef. I was up in Queensland some years ago—it must have been in the early days of this—when the planning committee had a conference up there. We went and had a look at different aspects of ecotourism in Queensland. We went out to the reef and had it explained to us how that was working. This is a few years on. How do you think it is working now? Do you think it is showing the benefits of all of the hard work that was put in by so many groups to get it to that point?

Ms Cheatham: The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority certainly consider it as one of their most successful programs. It has multiple benefits, and I think there are some that they perhaps did not predict would happen. The immediate benefit is that about 55 per cent—the last figure that I saw—of tourists that go to the Great Barrier Reef are travelling with what they call a high standard tourism operator. They are operators that have achieved ecotourism or advanced ecotourism certification. A majority of the visitors are travelling with one of these operators, so that they are actually getting the experience that the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority are wanting the visitors to have on the reef. So that is a success.

In a survey that they did last year, talking to tourism operators and people in communities up and down the Great Barrier Reef—local government, tourism offices et cetera, so not just the tourism operators themselves but the communities around the tourism operators—the high standard tourism operators program was rated at 75 per cent successful by all of those people surveyed. That was the highest of any of the programs that GBRMPA participates in. So communities around the tourism operators as well as the tourism operators themselves recognise the importance of the high standard tourism operators program.

The other benefit that I do not think they predicted would be as successful is the relationship with the tourism operators. Those high standard tourism operators are incredibly supportive of the Great Barrier Reef and now actively participate in a number of conservation activities with the Great Barrier Reef. They participate in Eye on the Reef. That is where the tourism operators actually report back to GBRMPA any changes in the environment that they see—change in species, outbreak of crown-of-thorns et cetera. The reef operators are going to the reef every day and in effect they extend the Great Barrier Reef custodianship of that environment. There is a huge amount of reef to be covered by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

So the tourism operators have become an extension of that custodianship, and they play an active role in conservation, in Eye on the Reef, in Bleachwatch, and they keep an eye on crown-of-thorns outbreaks. They are even doing things like reporting back to the Great Barrier Reef the GPS coordinates when they sight whales moving up and down the Great Barrier Reef. So they are helping the marine park authority to build their scientific basis and knowledge about what is happening with species and with the conservation of the reef. That perhaps is an outcome that they did not expect to be as successful. That relationship has been phenomenally successful.

MS PORTER: Do you think that is something that could be built into future agreements so that to some degree there is a requirement for that reporting back?

Ms Cheatham: Part of our certification requirements for new operators coming on is that they have to participate in those programs. To achieve ecotourism or advanced ecotourism certification you have to participate in some form of conservation in local and also international conservation. So there are core and advanced criteria. We certainly go to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority for a report on participation in programs like Eye on the Reef and Bleachwatch, which are conservation programs which work with the industry. It now becomes something that we look for in reef operators when we are reviewing certification, auditing them et

cetera. We are looking for their active participation in those programs.

The success of that program has been borne out in the variations that have been duplicated around the country. In WA there are extended permits given by DEC WA to operators who carry certain levels of certification. Victoria is in the process of rolling out a similar program. South Australia has adopted a similar kind of process recognising that certification, permitting and giving access. They are rolling that process out. That program with the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has become a benchmark. Other protected area managers are now looking to that as a success. In Queensland they are rolling out the tourism and protected areas program. ECO certification is going to be mandatory to get a commercial tour operators licence in the parks in Queensland.

MR SESELJA: I am interested in your views on whether or not there are regions that are in some way comparable to the Canberra region which have done ecotourism very successfully. If so, what has actually led to those successes? Obviously we can talk about the Great Barrier Reef, which is an amazing international attraction. Obviously Canberra has different sorts of things to attract people. Are you aware of any regions in Australia that have done ecotourism particularly well, and particularly regions that might be comparable in size and are inland, as the ACT is?

Ms Cheatham: I talk about the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority because it was such a landmark arrangement and it actually set the benchmark. It is perhaps a little less about what the natural attraction is and it is more about the relationship between the government agency and the permitting, the licensing and the tourism operator. What makes that program successful is that it is a partnership between the government and the private operator in that they are partners in the custodianship of a natural asset.

One of the core principles of ecotourism is that the commercial operation helps to financially support the conservation of the protected area. When the International Ecotourism Society started in 1990, that was a core premise of what ecotourism was about. We have seen similar relationships. In New South Wales, National Parks and Wildlife provide ecopasses to operators who have achieved certification. The Blue Mountains has been one area where that has worked really successfully and there are some great operators up there. I talked about Victoria. Victoria are certainly rolling out extended permits for operators that have achieved certain levels of certification, to give them longevity.

From a commercial operators' point of view, to have that opportunity, that certainty of having a 10-year or a 15-year permit as opposed to a three-year permit, allows them to make a business case for investment in additional or improved capital expenditure. It gives a value to their business, if they want to sell their business. Obviously with the permitting it depends on the jurisdiction but most of them allow a transfer of a permit to a new owner, ensuring that the standards and credibility criteria that they look at are transferred as well.

For a tourism operator, to have that certainty and longevity for their marketing, to allow them to go into an international market and know that they have some certainty of business going forward, has a lot of benefits. That is why other jurisdictions are

moving to that, because they recognise that with the good tourism operators that they are permitting, they want to keep them in the area. They also realise that the continual relicensing is a cost to government as much as a cost to the commercial tourism operator. It is almost like a risk management model that is being run over the licensing. We do not have to manage as tightly the low risk operators as the high risk operators. There is the matter of how we decide who they are; therefore we put our resources into managing the high risk, and we create a partnership with the low risk operators.

MR SESELJA: Apart from the licensing, with say the Blue Mountains that you mentioned, which obviously has some similarities with our region, were there other aspects that helped the success of ecotourism in the Blue Mountains? For instance, are you aware of whether there was a coordinated approach from the local councils and the state government or was it just a matter of the individual operators being given a framework in which to operate that allowed it to flourish?

Ms Cheatham: There are other areas too. Some issues have evolved in the Blue Mountains, as these things do. They are not static. The most successful model is when you have a local government, a tourism organisation, a protected area manager, the regulatory framework and the tourism operator. The combination of all of those players in the success of this is absolutely crucial. Where we see this struggle, to mention something else, is if we look at the national landscapes model—an attempt to build a brand for Australia around the reputation of significant national landscapes. You kind of need to have all the sides combined.

If you just want to do it as a marketing push, you need to be careful that you have the delivery behind the scenes and with the right experiences. Those right experiences need to have a regulatory framework that supports them and gives them longevity so that your destinational brand and marketing have longevity as well as credibility, authenticity and integrity. There is no point in developing a marketing strategy around ecotourism if you do not have the products but then you need the products to actually have a regulatory framework that allows them to flourish and work in partnership with the protected area manager. So if you get all of those lined up, that is the most successful model, from what I have seen.

THE CHAIR: On page 5 of your strategic discussion paper you say that you “invite government to partner with us as we build a green visitor economy”, which is a very positive statement and it obviously connects with what you have just been saying. Have you had any response from the federal government or any state or territory governments to your discussion paper, and particularly on this point?

Ms Cheatham: We are in an interesting situation in Queensland with a new government. The new government has produced a tourism policy which sees ecotourism as one of the six key themes for the state. A third of our certified operators are in Queensland. The birthplace of ecotourism in Australia was in Queensland. It was a collective of Queensland tourism operators that saw this opportunity with the development of ecotourism. So this is the birthplace, if you like. The Queensland government certainly have taken the opportunity in ecotourism and we are in active dialogue with them and we are looking to see how that will roll out.

In Victoria we have had an active relationship with both Parks and Tourism Victoria in developing their nature-based tourism strategy. We are still working through them on the development and recognition—that regulatory framework to support the tourism operators going forward. That gives them, in their marketing of the natural asset, the opportunity to push that. That is a long-term relationship.

This discussion paper was revised in 2012 but we released its predecessor prior to the last federal election. From a federal government point of view, I will be totally honest: we are not getting the opportunities in the development of the green economy. One of the issues we have is that when federal Treasury did the modelling of the impacts of the carbon tax on different industries, tourism was not one of the industries that were modelled. Therefore with a lot of the clean energy future programs it is hard to get tourism to be a priority. Other independent modelling says that because so much tourism is transport based, there are potentially quite dramatic impacts of the carbon tax on increased costs. I guess I do not need to tell you that nationally the tourism industry has not been in great shape over the last three or four years. So there is cause for concern for us from that point of view. Certainly in certain state jurisdictions we feel that we have a robust and positive relationship with state and territory governments to move the conversation forward.

It is not just about ecotourism; it is about developing a sustainable and environmentally sustainable tourism industry. It goes above the development of nature tourism. It is about making sure that we have a tourism industry that can survive the challenges in an energy-challenged, climate change future that we are facing. I do not want to be in the generation that saw the demise of the Great Barrier Reef and the loss of that tourism industry to all of those economies up and down the coast of Queensland—and, indeed, the loss to the national economy of that major tourism attraction. I guess that is where we sit in a bigger picture.

THE CHAIR: You also talked before about branding. Your paper discusses, as you said, the need for the brand reputation of Australia to meet the reality. I am interested in what you advise or if you have provided advice to various states and territories as to how they go about developing their own brand within that context. We heard earlier today some evidence from the government that in the ACT they are developing brand Canberra. I was wondering about getting the balance right between tying in with a brand Australia and still being unique enough to promote the ACT as a destination.

Ms Cheatham: We have had quite strong discussions and involvement with the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory is perhaps one jurisdiction that has an incredibly strong brand around its natural assets. I think that is where Queensland are looking to go back to. They lost their way in that regard. Some of the media, like *60 Minutes* on Sunday night, kind of clouds some of the immutable truth about tourism marketing and tourism brand.

From my point of view, I have been in the industry for a few years—25 years—and the brands that work best for destinations are the ones that are intuitive and easily understood without explanation. That is a key issue about a destination brand. But the other definition is that it has to be irreplaceable, which means it has to be something you cannot get anywhere else. I have had people say to me: “One of the problems Australia is having with international tourism is that we don’t have enough five-star

hotels. If we had another decent five-star hotel in Sydney, we'd be right." I do not think there is anyone sitting in San Francisco saying, "Gee, I'd love to go to Australia but there's just not enough five-star hotels." Or, "There's not enough casinos."

These amenities are important to people when they travel but it does not make their decision to travel. That comes to the crux of it. We get a bit bored with it because we are close to it and we find it all a little cliched, and there is jingoism and some issues around that. But if you speak to people from overseas, there are some immutable truths about Australia's natural assets that are irreplaceable. I mentioned the Great Barrier Reef. Then there are kangaroos and Uluru. With Tidbinbilla, there is the corroboree frog. These are absolutely irreplaceable natural assets and icons.

Once you understand what you have got that people will come to see and that they cannot replace, people do not say: "Gee, I'd love to go to Machu Picchu but it's a bit expensive. So why don't I go to the cheap Machu Picchu at Las Vegas?" They go to Machu Picchu and they pay the money because you cannot get it anywhere else. I think this is where we lose our way in the tourism industry when we are branding.

From my point of view at Ecotourism Australia, with respect to everything that you know about Australia as a place to visit from overseas, it is about what they know without explanation are our natural icons. If you understand that, as much as we get a bit bored with it, that is what works for them. That is what they want to see, and then we leverage off that to extend stays, expenditure and all the other things. They are going to eat, they might go to casinos and they might stay in five-star hotels. All of that kind of stuff is where they create the economic impact, and that is what you want from them. I do not think I answered the question.

THE CHAIR: There were some very good statements in there. You spoke before about your certification process and taking a triple bottom line approach to assessing programs, organisations or operators. Could you step us through how you go about that certification? Do people provide you with their business plans and what they are doing? Do you go out and check their operation? Once you have certified them what do you do about ongoing compliance? In cases where you find noncompliance, what do you do?

Ms Cheatham: It is a long answer again. The certification is a self-certification process. We have it online, which is what we prefer, for those people who are lucky enough to have good internet. We have a lot of remote and regional operators, as you would understand, so we have a workbook as well, a PDF version, that they can use. They work through the certification program. Within the certification we ask for operation plans, business plans, customer service, marketing plans. We have sections on responsible marketing. They need to have an environmental management plan. As they get up into the other levels they need to have interpretation plans et cetera. They need to provide us with all of that information.

We then have external assessors. These are assessors who carry environmental qualifications as well as having experience in the tourism industry. The environment assessors will then assess their application. In that assessment there is reference checking, there are full reviews of websites, TripAdvisor et cetera. So it is quite comprehensive but it is still a desktop assessment.

It is an extensive process. Our certification is 165 pages in a workbook format. A lot of the operators find as they go through the process that it is a business development tool. So they do have to develop, they have to implement and they have to change processes and procedures to meet the criteria. Once they have gone through that assessment process they do become certified. We then do audits on them, face-to-face audits, once every three years. We have a complaints process. If they have an audit and they have corrective action, they have a period in which to adjust and respond to those corrective actions. If we are not happy with their response to the corrective actions, they will be suspended. They will then have to fund another audit. If we are not happy with the outcome of that, they will lose their certification. We have a complaints process which also involves suspension, and having to fund a face-to-face audit—a whole process there.

We also have a process when they change management or ownership, which is a handover to make sure there is consistency with changes in senior management or changes in ownership. With our complaints process we have more than 1,400 tourism experiences, so we certify experiences, not operators. Some operators have multiple products that they certify. We have more than 1,400 experiences, which equates to about 700 tourism operators around the country. We would probably get four or five complaints a year. We have an online mechanism for people to complain or it can come directly through numerous different ways to us for managing complaints, and then we have a process. So we have quite a comprehensive compliance process.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for providing evidence this afternoon. That certainly gave us a really good background and some great information around certification and licensing. I have one last question. This inquiry is for the ACT but it is also for the surrounding region, what we call the Australian capital region. I believe you were sent the map of the Australian capital region.

Ms Cheatham: Yes.

THE CHAIR: You may want to take this on notice. Are there any other experiences out there that you have certified?

Ms Cheatham: We certainly have some operators in the Snowy Mountains that are certified. I think they fall within the region. The south coast really is not within your region. In the Snowy Mountains we have five operators certified: Alpine Habitats, Kosciuszko Thredbo, K7, Reynella Rides and Thredbo Valley Distillery. They are all certified through us, so we have five operators in the Snowy Mountains who are certified.

THE CHAIR: We do actually take in the south coast between Batemans Bay and down to the border with Victoria. I might leave that with you and if you do think of any others, could you send an email to our secretary. It might be a little bit hard to try and match up what is on your list with the map.

Ms Cheatham: So not Jervis Bay?

THE CHAIR: No, although Jervis Bay is part of the ACT, interestingly.

Ms Cheatham: We have some operators in Jervis Bay. We have probably three other operators that are in your area on the south coast.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for that. We will get a copy of the transcript to you. If there are errors, please speak to the secretary about that so that we can get that fixed up. Once again, Ms Cheatham, thank you very much for your time this afternoon and for appearing before this inquiry.

Ms Cheatham: Thank you for the invitation.

The committee adjourned at 4.32 pm.