



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, 24 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 2.10 pm.

WATSON, DR CHRIS, President, Ginninderra Falls Association Committee

HYLES, MRS ANNA, Member, Ginninderra Falls Association Committee

CUSACK, MR DAMON, Member, Ginninderra Falls Association

BARROW, MR GRAEME, Member, Ginninderra Falls Association Committee

THE CHAIR: I declare open the second public hearing of the inquiry into current and potential ecotourism in the ACT and region. I welcome Dr Chris Watson, President of the Ginninderra Falls Association, Mrs Anna Hyles, a member of the association, Mr Damon Cusack, another member of the association, and Mr Graeme Barrow, a member of the association, representing the Ginninderra Catchment Group. Welcome to you all. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement before you on the table. Could you confirm that you understand the implications of the statement?

Dr Watson: Yes.

Mrs Hyles: Yes.

Mr Cusack: Yes.

Mr Barrow: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Dr Watson, would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr Watson: Yes. On behalf of the Ginninderra Falls Association, we are very pleased to be able to appear in person at the hearings of this ecotourism inquiry. I will briefly summarise a couple of points and then my fellow committee members, Mrs Hyles, Mr Barrow and Mr Cusack, would certainly like to clarify some of our points.

First of all, this area so close to the boundary of Canberra, within cooee of Belconnen's western boundary, has been sitting there with very few people having seen it, other than a few old timers like me, for some decades before it was closed in 2004. It is obviously an area not only of visual grandeur, the Ginninderra Gorge, but also the associated area of the Murrumbidgee Gorge. We were down there this morning. As I say, it is so near but yet so far. Many Canberrans have not seen the area. It has to be brought into the public domain.

Of course, it is in New South Wales. That is why I am very glad that this inquiry on ecotourism is not only dealing with the ACT but also the region. It is particularly close in the region. The majority of users will be ACT people. I think at this stage I will ask Mrs Hyles to talk a little about what she sees as the wonder of the place and then our other members will talk on other aspects.

Mrs Hyles: My husband, John, and I own Ginninderra Falls. I do not know how many of you have been there. I know Mr Seselja has. I thought the easiest way was if I showed you a few pictures. The first is a map of the ACT. You can see the Ginninderra Falls in this section. It could be a wildlife corridor along Ginninderra

Creek. That is the proposed national park. That is an enlargement of it. It shows that it is close to the ACT border. That positions it for you. I can table those if you like. I brought copies of all these for you.

THE CHAIR: That would be great.

Mrs Hyles: This next one is an old poster that we used. When we had it open, Johnnie and I ran it as a national park. You can see the falls. It is quite spectacular. It is three kilometres from the edge of the suburbs of Belconnen. It is so close. People would be able to get there in a short time. School groups could get there within their school day.

When Johnnie and I started, we had a bit of a master plan for it that we developed with a firm in Canberra. We saw it as walking trails, camping, canoeing. We had a vision that we wanted to do that ourselves. A young girl injured herself out there in 2004 and we closed the park due to insurance. We could not get insurance. It has fallen into disrepair. There is so much that needs to be done. It is way beyond our capability, all the fences and the railings. We have had people look at it. There are a lot of quite serious structures that need to be built to access the pulpit lookout. To make that safe and secure, there is a lot of work that needs to be done. We really believe that it should be in public ownership. We are very keen to get it underway. We have the idea to do it but it is just beyond our means to do it.

I thought these old brochures were quite interesting. They used to be all around Canberra, in all the visitor centres and places. People picked them up from everywhere. The year that we closed it, 15,000 people went there. That was not serious marketing. That was just locals going out there. That was in 2004. I can leave all these with you. That is the little brochure that we used to hand out to show the walking trails et cetera.

The last thing I have that I thought you may be interested in—I am not sure whether you are—is a little video of Tim the Yowie Man out there. If you felt you were happy to watch the video, I will set it up. It takes 30 seconds. It is very important. You will be quite impressed.

A video was then shown.

Mrs Hyles: I did not ask him to make that. He asked could he do it. He said, “There is so much water, can I go out there?” I said, “Sure.” He rang me later that day and said: “I have taken the most amazing video. I have got to send it to you.” He sent me a couple of others. I can send them to you if you are interested. There are two others. We do not have the time to watch them all today. I can send them to you.

That is really all I have got to say. You can ask me any questions if you want any details about the falls.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Barrow or Mr Cusack, would you like to make a statement?

Mr Barrow: I am a member of the Ginninderra Falls Association Committee. I have some doubt whether I can equal Tim the Yowie Man—or Anna, for that matter! My

interest mainly is in the bushwalking capacity of the proposed park. I was first introduced to it in the mid-1970s, I suppose, when there weren't any trails there. Subsequently I also visited several times when trails had been developed by Anna and John. It was a terribly impressive experience. I went out today with the group and relived some of those experiences of long ago.

It seems to me that in the Ginninderra Falls we have got something which is not quite unique so far as the ACT is concerned, but there are very few, if any, falls of its size, magnitude and spectacular beauty within the borders of the ACT, and those that are, perhaps Gibraltar Falls, are really out of the reach of the ordinary person. Bear in mind that the burgeoning populations Belconnen and Ginninderra and also other parts of Canberra mean that this particular facility, if it became a national park, would attract not only the 15,000 who visited in the last year that Anna and John had it open but many more thousands.

Also, from a strictly ACT point of view, although bearing in mind that it is over the border, the benefits to the ACT from having a national park of that grandeur just across the border, with the only road access being through the ACT, must be of considerable benefit to this territory. I could see that as a feature it would be prominent in many tourist advertising promotions et cetera concerning Canberra and the ACT, even though it is over the border, because of the economic benefits that would flow from a large number of people coming into this territory not only to see everything else but also to go out and visit Ginninderra Falls.

There is another aspect. I thought that there could be some historical-heritage-environmental trail actually developed as part of the tourism experience if the falls were a national park. I am referring, of course, to Belconnen Farm, which, as most of you would know, is of considerable historical importance. Also, again across the border, is Parkwood, with its chapel, which is of strong interest, certainly in religious circles and also in historical circles.

So I could see that, if this national park proposal got up, there would be an opportunity for developing a sort of side highlight of a historical trail incorporating both Belconnen Farm, Parkwood and Ginninderra Falls. Thank you.

Mr Cusack: I am here today as a representative of the Ginninderra Catchment Group and not the Ginninderra Falls Association. I am a member of the Ginninderra Falls Association, but I am representing the Ginninderra Catchment Group today. We are doing a lot of riparian projects. The main aim of that is to create a habitat corridor from the falls to Mulligans Flat. That linkage corridor is one of our priorities. Having the falls as a national park would certainly help that in terms of its publicity and also people's awareness of where our water is going. I can guarantee that if people just go down there they will have a better appreciation of what is in the area. There are people in west Macgregor who have never seen the falls. They are quite amazing. I have been down there a few times, luckily enough. It is a great area.

The proposal from the Ginninderra Falls Association also links up to the Woodstock reserve—so along the Murrumbidgee and back up Ginninderra Creek—as a fairly significant linear reserve. The long-term size of the park could be anywhere, but from a catchment group perspective we would see that the immediate falls area—which is

Hyles's and Manny Notaras's place across the other side—would be areas that we would consider a high priority to protect as well as enable us to continue working back up the creek for that linkage between the falls and Mulligans Flat.

As a member of the Ginninderra Falls Association, I think the proposal for the national park has merit on a financial basis to supply money to environmental projects in the area. That would also be something we would look at. I have no doubt that it would be a successful park in terms of raising money, with the number of people that would go there and how easy it is to get to. It would definitely raise enough money to then contribute back to the environment upstream and look after the whole area.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Dr Watson: I have one or two more points to make. Can I do that now?

THE CHAIR: Certainly, Dr Watson.

Dr Watson: What we are concerned about now is how the ACT and New South Wales can come together on this cross-border issue. Your very interesting report on the ecological carrying capacity just published has a section on cross-border issues, the history of that and the more recent memorandum of understanding between the ACT government and New South Wales—with the appointment, of course, of Steve Toms as a cross-border commissioner. We are wondering whether, hopefully, some sort of government committee between the ACT and New South Wales could be set up. I do not know how the cross-border commissioner of New South Wales would be involved, but presumably he would be, and also, of course, the membership of the Yass Valley Council.

We are hoping that that gets a guernsey as soon as possible. I think we are at the stage where the operation will come under the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service because it is in New South Wales. But because most of the people visiting the area will be from the ACT, we must have a big input in setting it up. Obviously, funding is needed not only for purchase but also surveys that are needed there. To press this further we have a meeting set up. Katy Gallagher has invited us to go and see her next Tuesday morning, so that is interesting. We will be mentioning that there.

There are two or three other things. We have got the support, of course, of the National Parks Association of New South Wales. In fact, Brian Everingham, who is their reserves committee convenor, came down to the falls this morning. He came from Sydney to do that. Also, we have got the support of the ACT National Trust. We had a meeting with them before this meeting today. They feel that it is worthy of an article for the National Trust Australia-wide magazine.

Those are the additional points. You certainly did make the point in your carrying capacity report that the ACT demographer about talks this region by 2050 having—it is on page 55—between 500,000 and 600,000, let alone Queanbeyan. As Anna Hyles says, the number of visitors might have been 15,000 in 2004, but as the years go by it is going to be scores of thousands—four score: you name it—that will be visiting this area which is so close to all of us here in Canberra, particularly northern Canberra.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for providing us with that information. I know quite a bit about this proposal, of course. I hosted a forum here at the Assembly. At that time it was quite early days as far as the size of the park was concerned. There were a number of landowners from around the area who came along and asked some questions on that night. What have been your discussions with landowners since then? Have you modified that original proposal?

Mr Cusack: As seen at that meeting, there were people that were totally against the idea, and that is fine. The early map and the proposal were: “This is what we’d like.” Then in the negotiation stage we found they were not willing to be involved: “We don’t want to be involved in that.” Others, like Anna and John, have said they are quite happy. They would actually like to see it become a national park or a reserve area. That is what it is about. It is always going to be a bit of a growing process. For the Falls Association, it is about getting it started, even if it might take a while to develop the whole boundary—who is in and who is out—in terms of the size.

As to the size requirements, there have been changes to the reserves criteria that they use for parks. We had an area that we wanted to fit into that, but that is no longer the case. So a smaller park, if it is considered valuable enough, will be fine. If you look at the smaller areas that people are on board with, it is already big enough to constitute a fairly significant national park for our area. It is not going to be a big one compared with most around the country, but it is going to cover enough area to be a significant reserve.

The initial boundaries are not necessarily what we are looking at because I think we have found that across the river, the Murrumbidgee, in particular, there really was not support for the idea. But also we were not asking for a lot of that land. It was more about protecting the fence lines that are already there. There are probably ways around that if they are interested. Is that what you would see—that we would initially start off smaller?

Mrs Hyles: Yes. There is no real vision of people visiting the western side of the Murrumbidgee because it is a steep escarpment. They have said they want to keep their rural grazing operation going on. I think as long as it is the steeper escarpment country you might be able to interest them in the proposal even if they retained ownership and it was some sort of conservation order over the steeper country that faced on to the gorge. The majority of the land is important to the park as it is: there is some support or a huge amount of support. In our case it is big support. Manny Notaras is interested to see what is going to be put up. He is not saying yes or no. He wants further detail. The Flemings are in the same boat. They have not said a blanket no; they want to know what is going on. If it gets enough momentum going, I think people will come on board.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter and I have been out there in recent times and I am sure we both agree that it is a spectacular place. It certainly would be a great thing to have it opened up to the public again. Having grown up in Canberra, I did go out as a younger person to Ginninderra Falls on a number of occasions and really enjoyed those visits.

But there are those cross-border issues. Dr Watson, you just touched on those. You are having a meeting with the Chief Minister, so will you be raising with her those issues of it being pursued with New South Wales, whether through the commissioner or through some other mechanism?

Dr Watson: Yes. I am not sure how this will work, but it seems that the time is right for a working group of appropriate people from the New South Wales department of environment and heritage or the National Parks and Wildlife Service and people from the ACT parks and conservation service—I do not know who would convene it; perhaps Steve Toms would convene it—and members from the Yass Valley Council.

The Yass Valley Council are sitting on the sidelines. A lot of the people in Yass have never been to the falls—they have got to come through Belconnen, get through Southern Cross Drive and Parkwood Road—because it is out of their bailiwick; it is not visible. So we have got to get them onside too. We have spoken out at the Yass Valley Council last year and there is no antagonism; it is just that they need to be in the equation. David Rowe, their manager, said, “Please keep us informed.” But they are not going to do the running. We have to do the running.

We have got the help now of the National Parks Association of New South Wales. They are based in Sydney, and Brian Everingham came down today. He talks about community support and it is really quite wide here. We get very little antagonism at all—no antagonism that I have come across, other than, as Anna said, perhaps one or two landholders who are worried about no longer having ownership of their land. But the point is that there are all sorts of conservation covenants and so on.

The other thing I would just like to add to what Graeme said is that with all this buffer zone, the remaining land in west Belconnen, we have had the inching out of suburbs like Macgregor west. I think this committee may have been aware that David Maxwell or his company is wanting a big Riverview estate right along the Murrumbidgee, alongside our park proposal, right down there and going across the border into New South Wales. So I am asking this committee to use its good offices on appropriate land use for all of the remaining rural land, because that is the buffer zone for this park, so you do not want a huge number of suburbs willy-nilly coming right onto the edge of the gorge.

Similarly, on the other side of the gorge: mention was made of Manny Notaras; I am not sure of the company that he would form, but a lot of that visual area above the top falls is fairly bare hills all around there. They would have to have appropriate conservation covenants, so once again that would come under Yass valley shire and the New South Wales government. In other words, this cross-border planning is very important as well as the declaration of what will be national park itself.

MR SESELJA: Mrs Hyles, I am interested in knowing more about Ginninderra Falls as it is now. I have not been out there since high school when we camped. You closed it in 2004, so I am interested in the current state of affairs there. If that were to be turned into a national park, what are we starting with?

Mrs Hyles: We run a granite pit. I do not know whether you know that in the corner of that block is the Ginninderra red granite pit and that red granite is the material you

see on all the median strips and in front of the airport. We would hope that we would continue to operate the pit or the mine in the corner and subdivide off the Ginninderra Falls section of the park. The area that we are proposing to keep is the mine which is already in an area that was surface scraped dating back from the 20s up to recently. The area has been altered and you also have got the high tension wires going through. So we are proposing to stay up in that area.

The rest of it is very degraded. We have not done any work on the track since it closed in 2004. The bathrooms, the lookouts—it is all very degraded. But it is not impossible. The area that needs the railing is probably about 500 metres—that sort of area. We had quite good signage that we put in just before it closed. That is still there to some extent. The house that our manager lives in is probably in the best site for the visitors centre and it is not much of a house, so I would assume that that would all go. So it really is starting from scratch, which is why we do not feel we can do it. There is a lot of work that needs doing there and we would love to see it done. I do not know whether that answers your question.

MR SESELJA: Sort of; it does a bit. I am interested in what kind of space we are talking about here because I think the proposal talked about a 900-hectare national park. Is that correct?

Dr Watson: That would be about it.

MR SESELJA: So what part are we talking about here in terms of land you own?

Mrs Hyles: Our block there is 200 acres, 80 hectares, so we would propose keeping the small corner in the top. There is the quarry operating there. That is the entry that is used and we have got a separate entry into the gravel pit. We are moving away from this area towards here. This area is going to be reclaimed and filled with clean fill, which is currently happening, and we will then return that to a natural profile and treed. That is happening now. That will be filled shortly, like with underground car parks when they dig up the car park, and that will all be treed. So we are thinking we will be able to provide a buffer zone here so that as the quarry goes on in the next 10, 15, 20 years, depending on how quickly the resource is taken out, it should not interrupt what is going on down here.

This is the Flemings' block here. They are in part interested and the line of the park comes across, taking in the hill, leaves out the quarry and then goes across the river. This is all Manny Notaras's country here, on the other side of the falls, and it is too steep to do anything on. It is all covered in trees and bushes so you cannot use it for rural land anyway. With a positive step I do feel it is achievable. In the area that is needed to make it a good national park I do feel, as Damon said, we have got in-principle support to do what we are trying to do. You are really having to start from scratch with the infrastructure. Nothing we have got there will do the job.

MR SESELJA: Has anyone done estimates on what kind of initial capital would be needed in order to make it a useful national park?

Mrs Hyles: We have not really, but we did the estimate on the fencing. When you came out you saw the precipice where the lookouts stick out; they are precipitous

drops, so you need some very serious rails and fences and they need to be rock-drilled et cetera. I do not know the money but our ballpark figure was around \$2 million. We thought \$2 million would start a building, but it is probably \$2 million to \$3 million to get the job up, to really have good bathrooms and a little visitor centre. You could spend a lot more, but to get it open to a good extent we feel it would be two to three.

MR SESELJA: And obviously in addition to that, if you are talking about public ownership, you would be talking about purchase of that land plus other bits of privately owned land on top?

Mrs Hyles: Potentially, yes.

Dr Watson: Can I make one more point after Anna on that one? I think you have a copy of what our proposal was. I will table that again. It might be as Anna has said. The park might grow from a smaller area but it is our hope that this red gravel quarry is also restored and included in the park. I do not think Anna has any quarrel with that. What we mean is that they obviously would need recompense. As you say, Mr Seselja, it would cost more. But that is what we would like to see. That quarry can be restored. The ponds can be restored. Here is something else I might table. It shows that quarry area. Hopefully, in due course that will be purchased.

Most NGO groups are ginger groups or catalysts. We are not in the game of assessing costs. Dr Pratt, who is a member of our committee but who is not well at the moment, said, "Heavens, leave it to the appropriate crown law department and taxation departments and so on to assess costs." They could be quite large, but we cannot answer that. All we are doing is making the point about how vital it is that this area is in public hands so that it is there for posterity, over the generations. It needs a good buffer zone. This quarry area is definitely close by. It should be included. As a committee, as a whole, we would like it included in the park, even though Anna quite rightly thinks that might become secondary as far as purchase is concerned.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: I remember visiting it when I first came to Canberra in the 1970s. It has been a while. I distinctly remember visiting the falls before the area was closed. I have some recollection of it at that time as well. I want to explore the issue of public-private partnerships. You were saying that there are some areas where people do not believe they would like to give up the ownership of their land. Do you see a possibility of some public-private partnerships in this area?

Mrs Hyles: I do not think we have provided enough detail for the landholders to make any actual decision currently. As Chris said, this is something we would like to see happen. I think we need to get community and government support to then forge forward and give people the level of detail they need so that they can actually look at it and say, "I support that in principle," or not. We do not want just a blanket line in the sand and people saying, "My place is going to be taken away." They slightly balked at the outset.

It is a very steep bit of escarpment country that we are talking about. I do not see it being unlikely that it could not progress with all the landholders, but I should not

Speak for them because we have not discussed it with them. I think the detail needs to be provided. Once we move on from here, we will get that detail.

THE CHAIR: It is about getting support from the ACT government and the New South Wales government to set up some sort of working group to look at the economic issues and the environmental issues?

Mrs Hyles: Planning, land ownership and all that.

Dr Watson: And the Yass Valley Council.

MS PORTER: There is a potential for generating two things, the tourism that you are suggesting plus the protection of the area. The other side of the coin is to make sure it is preserved and protected. You need the balance of those two things. When you were running it as an attraction for the public before, how did you let people know that it was there? What did you do to promote the area? What did you find was most successful in promoting the area?

Mrs Hyles: We had little pamphlets designed, with the nice picture. There is a company that puts them into all the visitor centres and distributes them to the airport and the bus terminal and those sorts of places. Basically, people would pick up a pamphlet and it went from that. There were also a lot of people from the immediate Kippax and Holt corner of Belconnen that used to come down. We used to do season passes. They would buy a family season pass. They would come swimming in the afternoon.

That is a big issue for us currently. We are turning people away. It is well loved by that whole corner of Belconnen. Kids come and jump the fence and come down. It is a bit of an issue as times goes on, turning people away and stopping them jumping the fence. We have to put up quite high fencing, which does not look appropriate.

Mr Cusack: The other thing with that is—I do not know where the crown land issue is at the moment—during the work on lower Ginninderra, Ginninderra Creek was actually declared crown land. As far as Manny Notaras is concerned, with the purchase of his land, he indicated that was not the case. There is nothing to stop people walking along the Murrumbidgee River. There is already access available for people if they want to walk along it. You cannot stop that. The idea of having easy access to the national parks means you can have rangers there that are controlling what is happening. People are allowed to walk along the river and go there anyway. If they know that there is no-one there looking after the area, you find that you get trouble. With so much development in Macgregor, it is only going to increase.

Mrs Hyles: That was what we felt.

Mr Cusack: We are seeing a lot more pressure on the creek itself in terms of people going there. Admittedly, affordable housing brings with it the issue of not very big backyards and more people are out in the reserves, which is great as far as we concerned. It also puts a lot more pressure on those reserves. That is only going to intensify as we get more and more housing. That density along the Macgregor side, with fairly small backyards, means that people are out on the trails a lot and there are

a lot of people roaming around looking for places to go.

MS PORTER: What are the keys to it becoming a national park? The important things for you include conservation, of course, and that it is an attractive place for people to visit, whether it happens to be on their doorstep or they have come from elsewhere in Australia. It is about the management of the asset and also the people who are coming to visit. Is that right?

Mr Cusack: Definitely. Providing an area for people to go and have their fix of the environment is really important. The more people you see along the creeks, the more you realise that people love to get out, especially along waterways. The other side to it is that with a lot more pressure there is going to be a lot more potential damage if it is not controlled by rangers. As far as we are concerned, on-site rangers will be needed to control a lot of people in that area if it is open as a national park. Even if it is not, there are going to be a lot more people visiting the area, whether they are allowed to be there or not. They will come across land and people will just naturally do that. You cannot really stop it. It is about being proactive.

One of the things that the falls association would like to see is cross-border collaboration and that all sides are happy to be involved. I think the ACT needs to be involved because of the potential revenue from being able to look after Ginninderra Creek and parts of the Murrumbidgee and areas around there, as well as looking after the development.

Chris mentioned Mr Maxwell's proposal. I know Manny is waiting on Yass Valley Council's changes to their zoning and things like that in terms of what he might do in future with development and subdividing blocks. It is also about how the land becomes available. If Manny decided that he wanted to do a subdivision he would probably, given the area, have an offset requirement. If he cannot use that land, he is probably going to be fairly happy to use that as his offset area, which we would be very happy with because that is the best part of his land and that is what we would want in the national park.

MS PORTER: It is the same with the Riverview group as well.

Mr Cusack: Yes, in their proposal. They spoke to the Ginninderra Falls Association. It would be like Mulligans Flat. Money from the development would contribute to the management of the national park and a board of management style system like Mulligans Flat, which we think is a great idea—whether that goes ahead. That would be the ACT government's part of the recommendations. If that particular project got up and it was built in that they did have to contribute to the management of the area, it would be fantastic. It would also be a way of getting money to buy the land that is needed for the national park.

There are a million ways to get the money but, for me, the most effective way is the national reserve scheme. You need a little bit of money to contribute to that before the federal government will contribute their two-thirds. Knowing that people support it and everyone is on board, you can go ahead with costings. You can find out how much it would cost, what we would need and how we would go about it. Again, it is not really us that would do that. It would be the National Parks Association or

whoever takes that on fully.

Dr Watson: Mary Porter mentioned the management of Namadgi. At the moment we have the problem of feral pigs. That has been in the press. One of the landowners is having problems with deer along the Murrumbidgee and the gorge. The management is important now to keep the native flora and fauna in good order. It is crying out for management right now. If the national parks and wildlife rangers were there, this would be done.

Mr Cusack: We are also seeing a spread of weed issues through Macgregor because of the development. The further that goes the more likely that is going to impact on the falls region itself. At the moment, because it is locked away, it is being kind of protected, but that is not going to work when they get too close. At the moment there is enough distance so that it is not going to hurt but if the development gets a lot closer, then you will not be able to stop weed issues going into the park and you will have no-one to manage it at all. That would be a fairly big concern from a Ginninderra Catchment Group perspective.

Mr Barrow: I thought I should mention also that we were always of the opinion that there should be an entry fee if the national park became a reality. Anna mentioned 15,000 visitors. Say it was 15,000 visitors a year, that is \$150,000. If it goes up to 600,000, it is a million dollars. Although the initial costs of purchasing land and fixing up trails and that sort of thing may be a reasonable amount of money, you could imagine that the revenue would certainly offset any maintenance and salary costs year by year by year, especially with the growth in the population, which is forecast—as Chris pointed out—in that document there.

Mr Cusack: I would just add to that. There was an article in the paper. When you had it, did you have it managed by someone before you—

Mrs Hyles: Briefly with the YMCA.

Mr Cusack: There was an article at that time that there were 30,000 visitors a year.

Mrs Hyles: That was before. I did not state that figure because we did not actually have the documentation to back that up.

Mr Cusack: I can find that. It is on the internet. There is an article in the paper about 30,000 visitors. Was that in the early, mid or late 1990s? Or was it early 2000?

Mrs Hyles: We bought it in 1983. I will have to check that. We did not have documentation for that.

Mr Cusack: I would suggest that figures around 50,000 visitors would be fairly conservative.

Mrs Hyles: Yes, I agree.

Mr Cusack: Just the interest from Canberra alone I think would get you to there and then there would be others. The falls are an absolute people dragger, and these are

good ones, as you have seen.

THE CHAIR: I just have a final question. Mr Barrow, I wanted to pick up on some comments you made earlier around this idea of a heritage trail with Belconnen farm, the chapel and then the falls. Have you spoken to the owners of the various sites around that idea?

Mr Barrow: About that idea?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Barrow: No, but I have been to Belconnen farm a couple of times now at the invitation, as part of a group, of the owners and also to Parkwood. My instinctive impression is that there would not be objections, provided it was properly controlled—and, by “controlled”, I mean properly managed. I could see that a foot trail—and I do not think a vehicle trail is possible—would be very attractive. Not only the historic dwelling at Belconnen farm but also the woolshed I find really unbelievable.

I was in the Parkwood chapel 30-odd years ago, but since then it has been restored, to my knowledge. It was closed the day we were there. I could see that the owners of that property must be willing to look after it if they have spent money on its restoration. It is the same, I would suggest, with Belconnen farm. I think the three of them would form a very attractive alternative to just going out to look at the waterfalls on Ginninderra Falls. Once again, as with the national park proposal, it would require management and, as with the national park proposal, the agreement of the property owners. We have not raised that with them yet, but it is an idea that certainly appeals to me.

Dr Watson: I would like to make one more quick comment. The Belconnen farm is right alongside this 100-hectare Belconnen landfill site and that needs to be restored. That can be a general recreation area for casual recreation. It is right alongside. That needs to be restored and landscaped. It is detracting from Belconnen farm at the moment.

THE CHAIR: That is part of the Corkhills land, Mr Maxwell’s—

Dr Watson: No. The 100-hectare landfill site is owned by the government; it is crown land.

THE CHAIR: Yes, the land around it.

Mr Cusack: The land around it is. That site, by the sounds of it, would require a change of the long-term planning of that area. Recreational reserve is probably not an option as it stands at the moment. They are looking at restoring it, but as a grassland and not having access. For quite some time they have had it listed as a reserve tip, so if anything happened with the major tips it would be available as a reserve tip. I think that is in the long-term plan. That would be quite a considerable change to the use of that area. The process behind that I do not really know. There is not really an option for recreational area. I know that David, through the Riverview group, is looking at

solar plans there. I think they are proposing to make it a very large solar area. But again, there are so many things connected here that I think working out who is involved and who would like to be involved and the logistics is probably the next step for the whole plan of what is happening in the area—what the Yass Valley Council zoning is and what their planning is going to be about and whether that fits with the ACT's planning and all of those things are part of the big puzzle for the larger reserve—but initially, as you say, as far as we are concerned, starting off small is not a bad idea to get that community support as well, so that once people can go down there they can see the value of it.

THE CHAIR: So there is great potential.

Mr Cusack: Definitely.

THE CHAIR: As there are no further questions, thank you very much for appearing this afternoon before this inquiry. A transcript will be sent to you from Hansard. If there are any corrections, please let the secretary know. Again, thanks for appearing.

Meeting adjourned from 2.59 to 3.18 pm.

BYRON, MR PETER, General Manager, Australian National Botanic Gardens
SUTHERLAND, DR LUCY, Assistant Director, Australian National Botanic Gardens

THE CHAIR: I welcome Mr Peter Byron and Dr Lucy Sutherland of the Australian National Botanic Gardens to the second public hearing of the ecotourism inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary 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 Byron: Yes, I do.

Dr Sutherland: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to start with an opening statement?

Mr Byron: Yes, I do have an opening statement. Firstly, thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to appear before this hearing. We are certainly keen to share our experiences on ecotourism.

The Australian National Botanic Gardens is a commonwealth reserve, national institution and significant tourist attraction, managed by the Director of National Parks, a commonwealth corporation. The mission of the gardens is to inspire, inform and connect people to Australian flora. The National Botanic Gardens is a major scientific, educational and recreational resource; one of the first botanic gardens in the world to adopt the study and display of a nation's native species as a principal goal.

The gardens comprise 35 hectares of developed gardens and 50 hectares of underdeveloped bushland on the southern slopes of Black Mountain. Approximately one-third of the known flowering plant species that occur in Australia are represented in the living collection. The gardens are a national showcase for the horticultural use of Australia's native plants, including special collections of local and regional flora. This unique living collection provides visitors with recreational and learning experiences that enhance the understanding and appreciation of Australia's flora and landscapes.

A lesser known role of the gardens is our partnership with CSIRO to manage the Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research and this includes the Australian National Herbarium, the world's largest collection of Australian plant specimens. The herbarium provides a range of services including plant identification for clients and the general public. Together with the gardens, it is an important knowledge base that can be used by the ecotourism industry. The gardens is a place of learning and we play an important role in connecting people with Australia's flora and natural environment.

The gardens host approximately 450,000 visitors a year. That includes 10,000 school students from over 200 schools throughout Australia. We are a major attraction for visitors to Canberra. We have 52 per cent of visitors from interstate or overseas. We

have a strong connection with the local community through 1,600 registered friends of the gardens and they play an important role in delivering visitor experiences.

The gardens has several existing nature-based tourism products. Free guided tours are conducted twice a day seven days a week and they provide participants with knowledge on Australian plants and the natural environment. Specific day and night tours are also available for education groups, tour groups and other interest groups. We are currently implementing a range of initiatives to attract new audiences to the gardens and to increase the public's knowledge of Australian plants and landscapes. After-dark family adventure tours were successfully launched as part of ACT Tourism's Enlighten festival in March 2012. These tours are now offered to the public each month and can be booked by tour groups, providing an ecotourism experience.

An electric people mover will start operating guided tours in late May 2012. This is expected to attract a new audience to the gardens and enhance accessibility to some of our more remote areas of the gardens. A smartphone application on birds found in the gardens will be launched in spring 2012 and this will target the independent ecotourist, including those from the younger age group and the technically-minded grey nomads.

The Friends of the Gardens have produced a birds of the gardens booklet for self-guided bird watchers and they also conduct breakfast with the birds tours at specific times throughout the year.

A new tourism initiative to be launched in October 2013 is the red centre garden. Visitors will experience a selection of plants and landscapes from central Australia's iconic plant communities including mulga country, desert oaks, ghost gum woodlands, spinifex gardens and saltbush scrub.

In summary, the Australian National Botanic Gardens is an important national attraction for learning about Australian flora. It provides a range of nature-based experiences and opportunities to connect visitors to Australia's natural heritage and provides a gateway to the local and regional flora.

THE CHAIR: Dr Sutherland, would you like to add anything to the opening statement?

Dr Sutherland: Not at the moment, thank you.

THE CHAIR: In your submission you highlight the need for better transportation options between the ACT's nature-based tourism locations and you particularly mention between the Botanic Gardens and the arboretum. Could you elaborate a little on what the gap appears to be, and has this been an issue that has been raised with you by visitors?

Mr Byron: Basically we do not have a regular public transport service that drops visitors right at the Botanic Gardens. The closest stop is near the ANU. It is a relatively short walk to the gardens, but we see the opportunity for enhanced public transport services, particularly with the arboretum opening up in 2013, and developing a shuttle bus system between the two attractions. We think the demand would be there once the arboretum is up and running.

THE CHAIR: You also comment on the need for ecotourism training and certification to be better focused on supporting the development of local and regional expertise. Can you explain how you envisage this would take place?

Dr Sutherland: I think there are opportunities in Canberra to enhance the tourism training using such facilities as CIT. They do have some tourism training at the moment but it is not specifically focused on ecotourism and it does not currently link in with something like training that would support something like the Ecotourism Australia accreditation. So I think there are opportunities to look at that. Obviously that has to link with the demand within the region for that. Recognising how wide the region is with the map that you provided us, I think there would be a demand for that, particularly as Canberra is on the doorstep of the Australian alps and the Australian alps national parks.

THE CHAIR: Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: Thank you for coming in this afternoon. I was interested in your discussion about technology and how it can improve the visitor experience but also how it can—I think I got this from what you were saying—promote what the gardens is offering to the public both here in the ACT and in our region but of course more widely in Australia and beyond. Do you see the opportunity to expand on those applications? You said you have one development in relation to birds. I was just wondering whether you have any plans to expand that any further, and what do you see as the potential for those kinds of applications—not only that but other ways of using technology to get the message out there about what the gardens offer.

Mr Byron: Technology can be a very important learning tool plus a marketing tool. We are currently working on a bird application that will help people identify birds in the gardens, and many of those birds are obviously all throughout the ACT and the region. We also have plans to work on a plant identification application as well, which would also be very useful throughout the region. We also see technology as a valuable tool for us in getting our message out about Australian native plants. We have invested quite a lot in developing our website. We have online databases that people can access to gain information on Australian native plants. So we have quite a lot of resources available for the ecotourism industry or the plant enthusiast.

Dr Sutherland: I was going to add the independent traveller, recognising that some ecotourists are quite self-sufficient. As opposed to taking part in maybe either a small or medium sized part of a tour, they might be travelling in a small group by themselves and they often like these types of applications to enhance their visit but do not necessarily want to go with a guide. They are seeking a different type of experience but they still want that learning opportunity.

THE CHAIR: You mention in your submission that in 2011 there were 5,253 students from outside Canberra participating in the education program and that this reflected ecotourism principles, which sounds like a great program. Apart from that, what are your visitor numbers? Do you collect visitor numbers and, if you do, what is the breakdown between locals and interstate visitors?

Mr Byron: Yes, we do collect information. I am happy to give you our visitation records for the last 15 years. We have got those available if you are interested. A recent survey that we undertook last year showed that about 52 per cent of all our visitors are interstate or overseas visitors. The rest are from the ACT. We are happy to present our visitor survey as well. It has some really interesting information on where people are coming from, reasons for visits and so forth.

THE CHAIR: Has that number been growing over time?

Mr Byron: Yes. We have increased our visitation over the last 10 years by about 16 per cent. It is a steady growth.

MS PORTER: In recent times, have you experienced any drop-off because people prefer to have an overseas experience rather than remain in Australia, with the dollar being the way it was?

Mr Byron: I do not know that we have got that level of statistics.

MS PORTER: You would not know exactly why people maybe are not coming back?

Mr Byron: No.

Dr Sutherland: I do not think we could make that link to the fact that the Australian dollar is strong and obviously Australians are able to travel much more easily and affordably these days because of that strong dollar. It is probably like most of the other national institutions. Sometimes there is a bit of a drop, but I think our statistics for the first three months of 2012 are 13 per cent higher than they were last year.

MS PORTER: You are not seeing that trend?

Dr Sutherland: There is always a bit of a drop and it comes back up again. Certainly it is nothing that we are concerned about. Sometimes it is about the weather.

Mr Byron: We are quite weather dependent.

THE CHAIR: How do people find out about the gardens, particularly interstate and overseas visitors?

Mr Byron: We have got a range of marketing material that is designed for visitors that come to Canberra as a destination and then pick up the marketing trend to visit our gardens. We are participating in Australian Capital Tourism's marketing projects. We are advertising in "See Canberra" and those types of things. We have a really strong web presence as well. That is important for interstate and overseas visitors. We have a lot of information where, if visitors are looking for an ecotourism experience, often they will search a lot of this information on the web and make their own itinerary.

Dr Sutherland: There are a couple of other things. We are probably quite well placed

in terms of tour guides. If you think about *Lonely Planet* and *Rough Guides*, which are common books, we have a profile in those. The other thing which is really important is that we have got the largest friends group per capita of any friends group in Australia. We know that word of mouth is incredibly powerful as to why people come to the gardens. These are highly educated, well-travelled people, with families spread around the world. We find that they are big ambassadors for the Australian National Botanic Gardens and a very powerful marketing tool.

THE CHAIR: We did get a submission from friends. They did mention that there were approximately 1,700 members drawn largely from the ACT and the surrounding region, which seems like a very healthy number of people, and they do run tours and so forth. One of the things that they pointed to was the need for better linkages with government and non-government institutions. I am not sure that this is something they have raised with you at all.

Mr Byron: We are always looking for new partnerships that could enhance our role and we are actively working with a range of other national institutions and ACT government agencies. We are keen to enhance the partnerships that can help promote Australian flora.

THE CHAIR: They also mentioned the electrically powered people mover.

Mr Byron: Which they have funded, which is a great addition.

THE CHAIR: The flora explorer.

Mr Byron: That is right.

THE CHAIR: That will make the gardens even more accessible, particularly those with young children and those who may have mobility problems. It sounds like it will be quite a hit, I would think.

MS PORTER: One of the issues that other groups have brought up, and it is certainly in submissions, is the concern that once you encourage people to come to look at things like a national park or a gardens or whatever, you run the risk of damage caused by too many visitors. You get a lot of visitors who go somewhere and it is not necessarily malicious damage but just the continual presence of people in a place that will cause damage to the flora and fauna. Have you a concern around that as the number of your visitors grows? How do you militate against that?

Dr Sutherland: One of the things to recognise, of course, with the National Botanic Gardens is that it is a much more hardened site than a national park. There is the fact that it has paved walkways and much more direction for visitors in terms of where they go. Therefore, the Australian National Botanic Gardens has got the capacity for quite large numbers. We get nearly half a million visitors now. I certainly think we have got the capacity to take a greater number.

On top of that, what is important and an important role for a place like the National Botanic Gardens is the education role, raising people's awareness about treading lightly, with the view that those are principles that we want people to understand so

that when they are in a natural area and perhaps an area that is a little more fragile they know how to be much more careful about how they access that site and how they use that site. I think that many of us, including the National Botanic Gardens, have a responsibility in terms of our learning and education programs.

THE CHAIR: We spoke before about that link to the arboretum when it is opened, in regard to transport. What sorts of linkages do you have with, for instance, Tidbinbilla and other institutions? You have mentioned you have a connection with the CSIRO. Do you have any link or any ongoing relationship with Tidbinbilla or Birrigai or other ecotourism type facilities across the ACT?

Mr Byron: We have some very good relationships with Tidbinbilla. I was the general manager there before I came here. I know a lot of the people there. It is worth noting that some of their preschool programs are delivered in the gardens because it is a fairly long way for preschoolers to get to Birrigai. They are delivered in the gardens. That is a partnership that has been going for many years.

We are actively meeting with the arboretum and we are keeping in touch on a range of issues. We see lots of opportunities for joint marketing and working together in the future. They are still talking a lot about their plans at the moment. We have also raised the possibility of a walking track from the Australian National Botanic Gardens, through Black Mountain, to the arboretum.

THE CHAIR: How will you get across Glenloch interchange?

Mr Byron: There is a walking path that goes underneath. We have walked that several times. We think it is quite feasible. There is a future opportunity as well. We can interpret the flora and the landscape along the way. I see lots of opportunities between us and the arboretum. We have got the Pryor arboretum which is on National Capital Authority land within that precinct. We have got some ideas.

Dr Sutherland: With the Australian alps national parks, ACT parks and conservation are involved. There are a number of reference groups. People from the Australian National Botanic Gardens are on those reference groups. They provide advice on stakeholder engagement, scientific research and things. A range of staff provide support and work together with the Australian alps national parks.

THE CHAIR: One of the other things that I picked up on the walking tour that I went on with the Aranda friends was whether there were plants and so forth that were jumping the fence, if you like, out of the gardens onto Black Mountain. Do you have interaction with friends groups like that? Has it been an issue?

Mr Byron: We certainly would carefully monitor plants coming out of the gardens. It is an issue we have been aware of for many years. We actively manage that and control that. We certainly do meet with other friends groups in our general area. We also work closely with ACT parks on the management of Black Mountain. They have recently done a hazard reduction burn on some of our land. We work with them on those types of issues, pest control, weeds. There is a close relationship there.

MS PORTER: This may be in your visitor information but it seems that when I have

been there on weekends there are weddings and other kinds of things which are not really ecotourism related. Perhaps they are. They appear not to be.

How do you use that opportunity, or is there any opportunity, to capitalise on the fact that there are people who think it is a lovely place to get married or hold a reception and you can persuade them to come back? What are your return visitor numbers? Do you keep visitor numbers of people whose children may come as an educational experience and then bring mum and dad back at a later stage? I am interested in revisits.

Mr Byron: I will deal with the wedding issue first. The National Botanic Gardens provides a range of educational opportunities. It is a terrific place to get married. We closely manage any impact that it has on the gardens. Most of the time they have the wedding ceremony on the turfed areas. They will go into the cafe and have their function or whatever afterwards. That is carefully managed. We are keen to give all our visitors messages about the value of the National Botanic Gardens. We certainly do that at every opportunity.

Talking about repeat visitation, we certainly have got some statistics we can leave with you. We have got a very high return rate for visitors and some quite high rates of satisfaction and recommendation to other visitors. I am happy to leave those with you today or send them through separately.

MS PORTER: Did you notice any impact when you introduced pay parking? It used to be free.

Mr Byron: It was probably before my time.

MS PORTER: There must be records pre pay parking and after.

Mr Byron: I will take it on notice and get back to you.

MS PORTER: I do not want you to take up too much of your valuable time searching for that. If there has been any information or comments passed down to you to source that information, it would be good; otherwise, do not bother. I would be interested to know. I understand that you need to make it a going concern and you cannot afford to offer free parking anymore. I just wondered whether there had been an impact.

Mr Byron: We can try to find that data for you, for sure. It is a revenue source for us. We clearly advertise that all those funds are put back into the gardens. I think most visitors are quite happy to pay the fee. It is a management issue for us as well. We have the ANU next door. If we had free parking we may be filled up with ANU students taking advantage of free parking. It is a management issue.

Dr Sutherland: In addition, it is worth noting that our friends, as part of their annual membership, get complementary parking for the year. That is part of the membership. They are really high-return visitors and they are looked after in that way as part of their membership.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon. A

transcript will be sent to you. If there are any errors, could you please let our secretary know.

Mr Byron: Thank you for the opportunity.

Dr Sutherland: Thank you.

CORBELL, MR SIMON MLA, Minister for the Environment and Sustainable Development

THE CHAIR: Welcome back to the second public hearing of the inquiry into current and potential ecotourism in the ACT and region. I welcome the minister, Simon Corbell, and officials. I know that all of you are quite familiar with the privileges statement. Minister, do you have an opening statement?

Mr Corbell: Thank you for the opportunity to appear this afternoon and thank you for accommodating the slight delay in my schedule so that I can be here.

The government has made its submission and I do not intend to add to that with an opening statement but will endeavour to answer your questions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We did have officials from the Economic Development Directorate here last week and they gave us some information. I confused things a little bit; I was unaware you were on the schedule for this week, minister, but am very pleased to have you appear before the committee.

I want to get a sense of the role the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate plays in ecotourism in the ACT. Obviously tourism sits with economic development, but what sort of role does your directorate play? What is the connection?

Mr Corbell: My directorate have a range of engagements potentially around land use activities. By that I mean what is permitted in terms of activities on the ground when it comes to the zoning of land; whether or not certain activities are permitted or whether zoning needs to be changed to accommodate certain activities. The conservation policy areas of the directorate do have input into the development of plans of management for areas such as Tidbinbilla nature reserve and Namadgi national park and other areas under nature reserve status in terms of looking at issues around impact on biodiversity and the general ecology of those areas. Those would be the two main areas where my directorate would have an engagement, but in both respects that engagement would be in the context of advice to and guidance to land managers for nature parks and reserves, for example, which would be the Territory and Municipal Services Directorate or the Education Directorate in relation to Birrigai.

THE CHAIR: There was an ACT nature-based tourism strategy released in 2000. Does your directorate have any current role under that strategy?

Mr Corbell: Only to the extent I have already outlined.

THE CHAIR: In the investigation into Canberra nature park the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment highlighted nine areas that are affected by visitor use. From the perspective of your directorate what is the source of those problems? Is it the number of people visiting the areas or is it how they are behaving in the park, picking up things around rubbish and weeds and so forth? What is your experience? I guess we are crossing a couple of directorates here because we also have TAMS with the rangers, but I guess you have policy sitting in your directorate. What are the issues that are coming up around Canberra nature park from a policy perspective?

Mr Corbell: Which part of the commissioner's report are you referring to, Ms Hunter?

THE CHAIR: There were nine areas that did particularly talk about the Canberra nature park. I am trying to remember; I think Mount Painter was in there.

MR SESELJA: Mount Pleasant, Mount Ainslie, Mount Majura, Mount Taylor—

THE CHAIR: Yes. Thank you.

MR SESELJA: Jerrabomberra wetlands, Mount Mugga Mugga, Bruce Ridge, Black Mountain, Aranda bushland. It is in the government's submission to the inquiry.

THE CHAIR: As well, yes.

Mr Corbell: In relation to those matters obviously the government has not yet prepared its response to the commissioner's report. That is still under consideration. But it is understood that there is a range of emerging conflicts in terms of use of and management of those areas of nature reserve, in particular impacts that can be created, for example, through mountain bike activities particularly where mountain bike activities occur in areas other than designated trails—that has been a common issue in Canberra nature park—and the construction of ad hoc or unauthorised trails. The impact that has on areas of the nature park has been an emerging area of conflict between, for example, mountain bike users and their organisations and park care groups and indeed land management staff themselves. We are seeking to engage in those issues constructively and I know the land manager in particular has regard to ways that these different types of activities can be accommodated. For example, I know in areas around Mount Painter and the Aranda bushland where mountain bike competitions have been held they have been held in ways that have sought to constrain the activity to formal trails only, thereby reducing the impact and protecting areas of Canberra nature park that are more sensitive to impacts like that.

The nature conservation policy area in ESDD obviously provides advice to the land manager on the sensitivity or the vulnerability of areas of Canberra nature park and has regard to, for example, particular times of the year where wild flowers may be more prevalent than others and also a range of other issues similar to that. So that is what we have as our engagement with the land manager. In terms of the commissioner's report the government is seeking to finalise its response to the issues raised by the commissioner in his report.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Porter.

MS PORTER: I was just thinking about what you were just saying and I was reminded about some issues that we had at Pinnacle with regard to horse riders who were going off the bicentennial trail there. I think that has been resolved quite satisfactorily in discussions between those groups and with the rangers and other government officials. That is just an example of how those matters can be resolved.

Mr Corbell: That is right, Ms Porter. These issues need to be resolved through

education and consultation with the different user groups. These types of activities can be accommodated in Canberra nature park and the government's policy has been to seek to accommodate them because the nature park is a valuable resource for recreational activity. The key is to make sure it happens in parts of the nature park or parts of Namadgi, for example, where the impact is managed and is not detrimental to vulnerable parts of those reserves or parks.

MS PORTER: Do you see a role for private and public partnerships in managing some of our natural resources into the future with regard to the fact that we do have a very valuable asset and our own population here but certainly visitors from interstate and around the world may want to come and visit and look at these things and therefore there is a cost involved in managing that? Do you see a role for public-private partnerships? There are some examples, for instance in Queensland, of management of areas of national significance. I am thinking of the barrier reef as an example but also the hinterland there.

Mr Corbell: The government has been exploring this issue to a limited degree in relation to, for example, Jerrabomberra wetlands and Mulligans Flat nature reserve where the establishment of the board and a trust for those two sites is a deliberate decision to establish a vehicle that could potentially attract private investment or private contribution to enhance and upgrade the visitor facilities and the visitor experience of these sites. That is in its early days and it is important that we keep a watching brief on how that progresses and what level of interest there is from private contributors to investing money in upgrade of visitor facilities and general management of these two reserve sites. We have done that there.

The government obviously has also taken some steps in relation to providing some fee for service type visitor experiences in other nature reserves—the obvious one is Tidbinbilla; there is an entry fee to Tidbinbilla—but also use of some of the homestead sites like Nil Desperandum for overnight stays by private individuals for a fee. These are the types of things we explore.

Overwhelmingly the responsibility for management of nature parks and reserves falls on the public purse, and that is appropriate because these are public assets. But where there are strategic opportunities to encourage private sector contribution, such as the vehicles that have been established at Jerrabomberra and Mulligans Flat, that is something that is worth trying; but it has to be done on a case by case basis and it is certainly not a substitute for public contribution to the management of nature parks and reserves.

THE CHAIR: With the Jerrabomberra wetlands situation—and, as you said, something has been set up—what stage is that at? I know that there was talk about being able to develop the wetlands around education and so forth. Has there been much progress? I know that the former Chief Minister's interest was also sparked after he had visited the London wetlands and looked at that model. What progress has been made, or is it very early days?

Mr Corbell: A board of management for each of those reserves has been established and trustees are in the process of being established for the purposes of being custodians of any financial contribution that is made by the private sector. At the

moment, specific plans of management for each of the reserves are under development. That process is being overseen by the board that has been appointed for that purpose. That is the state of play. We have got very good engagement, I must say, from respected individuals with a nature conservation background, whether it be ecologists or land carers. There is a broad range of skills and experience represented on the board of each of the trusts. That is, I think, progressing very well.

MR SESELJA: I am interested in what is the government's position on nature-based tourism and ecotourism. The submission that we have pretty much goes through the motions, I guess it is fair to say. It gives a brief description of some of the things that the government does. Does the government want to see our nature reserves, our national parks, utilised more and used by tourists and seen as a tourist attraction?

Mr Corbell: Yes, we do. That is why we have taken a series of steps to provide more diversity of tourism activity in our nature parks and national parks and reserves. The best example is the decision to open up the homestead at Tidbinbilla for overnight stays. That is an issue which is actually quite contentious, particularly amongst organisations such as the National Parks Association who do not support the idea of people staying at homesteads in national parks or nature reserves. They may have a somewhat different position on Tidbinbilla, but I certainly know they have not supported proposals such as the use of the Gudgenby homestead in Namadgi for overnight stays or short conferences and so on where people live in the homestead. It is a very large and, I must say, quite beautiful homestead.

I would recommend going there if you have not been to Gudgenby homestead. It is currently used for the accommodation of land management staff, but it could be used for other purposes. That is not actively on the government's agenda at this time, but it has been raised in the past. We remain open to those types of approaches. We think there are opportunities to further promote the visitor experience in national parks and reserves. Nil Desperandum is a good example of a recent decision to try and do that.

MR SESELJA: What are the arrangements for the use of that homestead at the moment? How has that occurred?

Mr Corbell: It is owned by the territory. It is quite a large building, a substantial building. It is currently used to accommodate staff who work in Namadgi National Park.

MR SESELJA: That is the one at Gudgenby, did you say?

Mr Corbell: Yes.

MR SESELJA: And at Tidbinbilla what are the arrangements there?

Mr Corbell: In relation to which building? There are a range of buildings at Tidbinbilla.

MR SESELJA: You referred to a homestead. I was not sure—

Mr Corbell: Nil Desperandum. Nil Desperandum is a heritage site which, regrettably,

was largely destroyed during the 2002 fires. It has been rebuilt to its original heritage presentation. It is now let out on a short-term, overnight basis for anyone who wishes to hire the homestead to have that experience.

MR SESELJA: In terms of the huts within Namadgi, as opposed to the homesteads, the arrangements there appear to be that they are just for emergency stay. Is that still the case?

Mr Corbell: The stock huts, the old farming huts, in Namadgi, I have to say, are not salubrious accommodation whatsoever. They are pretty basic. They do not have plumbed facilities. They do not have anything like that. They do not have heating, apart from a fire, and they are certainly not very well insulated. I have spent a few nights in one myself. They are used basically for overnight hiking accommodation. Hiking groups can use some of the huts overnight. In other instances they are not even available for that purpose. They do not have bedding. They do not have anything like that. Hikers will use the huts to camp in or near overnight. That is really the limit to their use because of their age and the nature of their construction.

MR SESELJA: That is considered to be an appropriate use, is it, in terms of hikers using it as an alternative to a tent or something when they are on long hikes?

Mr Corbell: Generally speaking, yes. It will depend on the individuals. I have certainly seen instances where people will base themselves at a hut, but they will still pitch their tent to sleep in. They might have a meal in the hut. They will use the fireplace in the hut and so on and enjoy the experience of being in an old stockyard hut.

THE CHAIR: But it is warmer in a tent to sleep.

Mr Corbell: It is warmer in a tent and probably a bit more comfortable in terms of the bedding and so on.

MR SESELJA: I am pleased to hear that the government wants to see those areas utilised. Is there a need then to be looking at the management plan of Namadgi, for instance, which is cited in the government's submission? It puts some restrictions on which make it, I think, difficult for operators to set up. It talks about commercial tour operators not being permitted to establish permanent camps, bases or storage areas in the park, for instance. Is that something the government is looking at changing? That seems like something that would restrict the ability for operators to be setting up and attracting tourists and, therefore, enabling people to better utilise, other than what we have just talked about with things like hiking.

Mr Corbell: I am not familiar with all of the detail. I do not have to hand all the detail of the Namadgi National Park plan of management, but what I would say in general terms is that, first of all, Namadgi is obviously readily accessible from the Canberra urban area. Compared with many other national parks, we are very fortunate to have one literally on the urban doorstep. Obviously, large parts of Namadgi are relatively inaccessible and are considered to be very fragile in terms of their ecology. A large part of Namadgi is classified as wilderness area where there are not even many, if any, formed trails. So the only way to get into the wilderness area is either by air or

walking in. That is a nature-based experience in itself. To be so close to a large urban centre and in what is a formally designated wilderness area is quite a unique experience in and of itself. There are some beautiful parts of Namadgi that can be enjoyed for people who are willing to walk in and to plan that type of activity. I know that that amenity is highly valued.

The provisions of the plan of management I think are appropriate. The plan of management has been developed through an exhaustive process with stakeholders. I know that the Assembly committee has looked at the plan of management process itself. I think we have to respect the consultation process that we have gone through in terms of what should and should not be permitted in terms of the matters you raise, Mr Seselja, in Namadgi. I think really the proximity to the urban area of Namadgi means that, unlike other national parks that are perhaps more remote, the permanent basing of commercial activities and physical facilities in the park is just not the pressing issue it is in more remote national parks in other parts of the country.

THE CHAIR: In your submission on page 3 you point out that Namadgi has a less developed range of visitor facilities compared to Tidbinbilla. Is there a plan to extend the visitor facilities out at Namadgi?

Mr Corbell: I would need to seek some advice from the land management agency, TAMS in this case, parks and conservation and lands, in relation to that matter. The Namadgi visitors centre itself is an excellent facility and a great entry point for the park, but once you get into the park the range of facilities and interpretive services is more limited. We do have some excellent signage and interpretive information at a range of sites across Namadgi—the old tracking station sites, for example. There are excellent interpretive facilities there.

There are good arrangements for camping now within Namadgi at a range of sites—Orroral Valley, Honeysuckle Creek and so on are great camping spots—but it is not the same range of facilities as at Tidbinbilla, which has a much stronger education-based focus. I am sure land management staff have a range of views about what further steps can be taken to further improve the facilities, but I would need to seek some advice from TAMS on that matter.

THE CHAIR: I just wanted to get a sense or an idea of how ecotourism fits in with government and directorates, because, as we have established, Economic Development takes on that major tourism role as far as promoting brand Canberra and those sorts of things, TAMS with the park rangers and on the ground staff, and then in between we have the Environment and Sustainability Directorate setting the environment plans and raising the issues around what needs to be protected and what the impacts are. How does all that come together and who takes the lead in an area such as ecotourism?

Mr Corbell: I do not think there is one lead. There are different aspects to this area. Promotion of tourism and visitor activities is a tourism function. Management of nature reserves, mitigating impacts and protecting from impacts are the responsibility of land management and conservation policy areas of government. So it is a collaborative approach. There is not one area in charge of ecotourism, because it is not just one thing.

THE CHAIR: And it does get coordinated?

Mr Corbell: Use of nature parks and reserves is driven fundamentally by the plan of management framework. The plan of management is the framework that sets out what activities are and are not appropriate and that is informed by decisions, research and policy across government, particularly from the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate and the land manager, and having regard to what is emerging in terms of tourism-related activities. The land manager itself has a dual role—obviously a nature conservation role but also a visitor access and enabling role—and then sitting alongside of that are private operators who are wanting to access public land for their own visitor businesses.

It is about making sure that the framework is clear about what can and cannot happen, giving guidance to land managers about those matters, making sure the land managers have good dialogue with users such as privately-based ecotourism activities and then obviously there is the broader promotion of the city—as you say, the brand of Canberra as a place to visit. But many of the ecotourism activities in the ACT are, I would argue, undertaken by the territory itself. Yes, there are some private businesses involved, but there would be an equal contribution by the land management agencies themselves in terms of the range of activities that occur—as I say, going back to Tidbinbilla, going back to the access to homesteads, going back to the guided walks, the tours, the events that are put on by the land managers in our nature reserves over any given year. So in many respects the land manager is acting as an ecotourism operator itself as much as it is operating as a nature conservation protection agency.

MS PORTER: I was recently at the Cotter with Greening Australia, doing some planting, and there were some Indigenous rangers there who were working, obviously through TAMS, presenting education to the public about the former use of plants and the current use of plants in relation to the traditions of the Indigenous people who have lived there for aeons. How much involvement do our Indigenous population here have in the formulation of ecotourism opportunities? Do they have a way of presenting to the government some ideas that they might have with regard to education or with regard to other attractions that they could offer?

Mr Corbell: I have a couple of things to say there. First of all, the Indigenous community is represented on the board of Namadgi, for example, recognising their cultural ownership of that site and their ongoing affinity and connection with it. So the Indigenous community is closely engaged in setting the rules about what does and does not happen in areas like Namadgi, recognising that there are some very significant cultural sites for Aboriginal people in Namadgi and Tidbinbilla. That said, Indigenous business activities, whether they are ecotourism activities or other activities, are supported through a range of government programs, both federal and territory, and that would be the approach we would adopt to engaging with Indigenous business in this respect, recognising that it is a business support function whether it is an eco-based tourism function or not.

THE CHAIR: Mr Seselja.

MR SESELJA: I am interested in what role your directorate has in some of the information, signage and some of the other things within the national parks. I think we asked this question of the economic directorate and it was not clear how it was all coordinated. There is obviously the kind of signage which is about information or about telling you how far you are from a particular place or where you are, and I think there are some criticisms from users of Namadgi that that is not great in some areas. Then there is more the educational type information. You referred to the stuff in the Orroral Valley or at the tracking station, which I think is very good, and the historical stuff there is quite useful. What role does your directorate have in that? Sometimes it will be of an environmental nature; sometimes it will not be. Where does your role come in?

Mr Corbell: That is not a role for ESDD. That is a role for the land manager. The land manager is responsible for the maintenance and the development of the physical assets in the park, including signage, so—

MR SESELJA: So they would not consult? Where there is environmental education type stuff, is there a role for the directorate?

Mr Corbell: We have a limited role. A conservation policy branch in my directorate informs and assists with making sure land managers have a good understanding of the particular sites, the areas of emphasis, the areas of importance, the overall ecological values of the park. Land managers have this information at an intimate level already, but the scientific analysis that backs up that comes from the conservation policy area and the research functions in the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate. So, yes, we inform land managers' understandings of sites, ecosystems, vulnerable species and so on, and that would assist the land manager in how they choose to present or provide interpretive information or so on to visitors to areas like Namadgi.

THE CHAIR: How does that dialogue happen between the two? Is it an ongoing relationship? Is there a mechanism for regular engagement?

Mr Corbell: Absolutely. These functions are not sitting in isolation and only talking to each other through a committee. Our nature conservation research scientific staff are working with rangers every day, working with the land managers and the ranger staff every day, because they are out in the nature parks regularly. A great example is the kangaroo monitoring project which people may have seen on the television program the ABC screened earlier this year. The scientific staff who are doing that program are the staff of ESDD, but for practical purposes they are on the ground with the land management staff because the land managers have custodianship of the reserves and they are facilitating access and assisting scientific staff as appropriate. That is very much the relationship. It is an ongoing, regular, almost daily, interaction between land management staff and scientific and research and policy staff. That is important to ensuring we get good and well-informed outcomes.

THE CHAIR: An argument has been put that the land managers from TAMS and the research policy arm should be in the same directorate. Do you have any comments on whether that would have benefits or not?

Mr Corbell: I think that is a bit of a moot argument, to be honest. I think it is more symbolic than practical. Therefore I do not think it is really that important a debate. What is important is the maintenance of the relationships and the communication between the relevant parties. The government has taken the decision that, particularly following the 2003 fires, there should be a single land manager for the territory and that was to address issues around fragmentation of effort, fragmentation of knowledge, understanding and responsibility for bushfire management and prevention in particular, and recognising that the land management task in the territory is an urban, peri-urban and rural function. It makes sense for the land manager to sit in an agency that covers all three areas. I can appreciate that for some people it would make sense to have ranger staff at Namadgi in the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate. But I do not think it would make sense to have ranger staff responsible for urban parks to be in the same directorate and that is the challenge we have as a city-state. So for me, as I said, it is a bit of a moot point.

The real issue is communication, engagement, consultation and collaboration. I have not seen any examples that there is not good collaboration, communication and engagement between conservation policy staff and land management staff. If I had, I would be prepared to think again about the organisational structure, but no-one is able to highlight to me that there are problems with that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for appearing this afternoon, minister and officials. A transcript will come out. If there is any error, please let the secretary know.

The committee adjourned at 4.50 pm.