



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING, PUBLIC WORKS AND
TERRITORY AND MUNICIPAL SERVICES**

(Reference: [Tidbinbilla revised draft plan of management](#))

Members:

MS M PORTER (The Chair)
MS C LE COUTEUR (The Deputy Chair)
MR A COE

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 30 AUGUST 2011

Secretary to the committee:
Ms V Strkalj (Ph: 6205 0435)

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.

WITNESSES

GOONREY, MS JENNIFER CHRISTINE, Immediate Past President, National
Parks Association of the ACT..... **1**

GRIFFITHS, MR ROD, President, National Parks Association of the ACT **1**

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Amended 9 August 2011

The committee met at 10.02 am.

GOONREY, MS JENNIFER CHRISTINE, Immediate Past President, National Parks Association of the ACT

GRIFFITHS, MR ROD, President, National Parks Association of the ACT

THE CHAIR: Good morning, and welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Planning, Public Works and Territory and Municipal Services inquiry into the Tidbinbilla draft management plan. There is a blue card in front of you which is the privilege statement. Have you had a chance to have a look at that?

Ms Goonrey: Yes.

Mr Griffiths: Yes.

THE CHAIR: And are you comfortable with that?

Ms Goonrey: Yes.

Mr Griffiths: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. You understand the privilege implications of that. Before we proceed to questions, do either of you have a statement that you would like to make?

Mr Griffiths: Yes. We welcome the opportunity to make a presentation to the standing committee on the revised plan of management for Tidbinbilla. The NPA has had a significant interest in this area of our conservation reserve. We have been involved in the plan of management right from the start and have also been involved in the community consultative committee that was formed to help guide the development of the draft plan of management.

In most parts the NPA sees that the draft plan of management is quite well considered, but we would like today to raise a couple of areas of concern—the areas of most interest to us both locally and from an Australia-wide position. These are accommodation and commercial tour operations within our reserve system and, in particular, relating to Tidbinbilla. Both of these issues point maybe to a view on behalf of decision makers that conservation reserves must pay their way. We believe that the conservation reserves actually already pay their way. Certainly in the ACT there are many benefits that our reserves provide to the ACT. There are, naturally, tourism benefits directly affecting our economy, but our reserves provide fantastic water for the ACT and there are significant savings in the treatment costs associated with our water simply because we have fantastic reserves. There are also fantastic health benefits to our community from the reserve system that we have, of which Tidbinbilla is a key part.

We are concerned that many jurisdictions within Australia seem to have forgotten the primary purpose of conservation reserves naturally being conservation. That is why we have been keen to participate in the Tidbinbilla plan of management. Certainly there are areas within this plan of management that seem to be raising issues for us

specifically relating to these two points that we are wanting to talk about.

There are a number of accommodation proposals within the revised draft plan of management. The first one I want to talk about is the valley floor. There are potential arrangements for camping, ideas maybe for eco lodges going in there. But we believe that all of these need to be addressed in a sustainable manner. Certainly, within the valley floor, water is an issue. There will be heavy reliance on groundwater, and we know that groundwater resources are not infinite. There are issues about other infrastructure for developments within that valley floor relating to, say, sewerage and power. If eco lodges go ahead, how do they actually get serviced? How do we move forward in that way? And there are the security issues that having accommodation within the Tidbinbilla valley will have in relation to the wildlife collection and also the threatened species breeding.

It is interesting that we have a reserve for camping not very far away—literally in the next valley across, at Woods Reserve, and that is very underutilised. We also recognise that the Birrigai component of the Tidbinbilla precinct provides quite good accommodation. That can certainly be developed, and in such a way that it does not compromise the security of the Tidbinbilla nature reserve component. As I said, with proposals for camping, we are interested in why they may go ahead when there is underutilisation of the nearby Woods Reserve.

We also note that Nil Desperandum may be utilised for accommodation. I draw your attention to this statement in the original plan of management:

Adaptive reuse of historic buildings needs to consider the implications for heritage values, management and equity issues related to community access.

I think those are three key points in relation to accommodation, certainly in relation to Nil Desperandum. Certainly there is a need for a cost-benefit analysis of all of these proposals. We do not want to see the ACT disadvantaged by moving into a commercial sphere when it is probably not in our best interests.

In relation to commercial tour operations, the plan of management allows vehicular access to locked gate management trails within the conservation part of Tidbinbilla, subject to licensing. In considering whether this should be included as a planned action within the revised plan of management, it is important to assess whether such access has the potential to compromise the natural values, which is what that area is actually in place for. Commercial vehicle access, we believe, would undermine those values associated with zone 1 of Tidbinbilla. The draft plan of management refers to the expectation of a bush setting with few management intrusions within zone 1. How that corresponds with suddenly meeting a tourist vehicle going up Camel Back Trail, I am not sure. I can see distinct conflicts there. I can also see potential safety issues with vehicles going up a management trail where people are not actually expecting them to be.

These are issues that are affecting all jurisdictions across Australia. We believe that they are important issues that need to be addressed within the plan of management and that they are not being addressed at the moment. Christine, would you like to add anything to those points?

Ms Goonrey: As well as being the immediate past president of the National Parks Association of the ACT I am also the President of the National Parks Australia Council. So, as Rod said, we can bring a national perspective to this. We are very aware of the fact that jurisdictions across Australia are attempting to bring commercial ecotourism into national parks. It is a matter of great concern because it appears to be driven by commercial interests rather than by conservation issues. There were some elements in the original management plan or draft discussion paper. In the 2010 and 2011 ones you can see the management plan moving back towards the conservation focus, whereas originally it had a very heavy commercial tourism focus. A lot of money has been spent—over \$100,000 a year, I understand—on contracts for promotional purposes for Tidbinbilla alone, without any connecting mechanisms to the broader natural estate in the ACT. There has been a huge push to put a tourism emphasis into Tidbinbilla. We would question whether that is appropriate.

The second question that we have is to do with letting out contracts to providers without testing the market and without going to contestability for these contracts. This concerns us very much. We are concerned that a particular company, Conservation Volunteers Australia, is referred to in the community section when it is not a community group in the way that we understand it. Its governance is very much an internal function. The people involved in it, the people who volunteer, have absolutely no say over the governance as opposed to our local Landcare groups which actually manage the groups that they are part of.

Conservation Volunteers Australia is an external ecotourism company which is attempting to build a national profile. It is a not-for-profit organisation, and that is fine. It has employees here—very good employees, I must say. This is not a comment on the company itself. It is a comment that it is there under “community” whereas, in fact, it is a commercial provider—an NGO but a commercial provider—which is providing contractual services without those contractual services going to tender. That is enshrined in the management plan. Conservation Volunteers Australia was actually running ecotourism plans—it was advertised internationally last year or earlier this year—before the management plan was even approved. It was a matter of grave concern to community groups that this whole process was being pre-empted by a commercial contract which is commercial-in-confidence.

There are some real issues underlying this management plan and the approach which has been taken to the promotion of tourism activities in Tidbinbilla. It does not seem to be terribly businesslike. It seems to have been a bit of a grab bag: “Let’s go with what everybody else is doing. Let’s get something on the map quickly. These people are really good, they’ll do it for us.” I do not think that serves the ACT’s best interests and it does not serve the community’s best interests. I hope I have made sense.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Christine. We will go to questions now. Alistair is at a disadvantage because he is a long way away and cannot see you. I might go to Alistair first given that he has that disadvantage and so he does not get forgotten. Alistair, did you have an immediate question?

MR COE: I have got questions—although they are not necessarily in any order—with regard to the report. Is that okay?

THE CHAIR: That is fine, Alistair. Go ahead.

MR COE: I am particularly interested in the comments about how the community might be updated about the plan of management. One of the comments in the association's submission was that it was not clear how that was going to happen. Does the association have any thoughts as to how TAMS can update the community with regard to the management plan?

Mr Griffiths: I think our comment was in relation to the next stage where a lot of the issues are actually going to be resolved through the development of a master plan. A lot of the contentious issues that I have raised today will be subject to a master plan. The draft plan of management did not provide any clear mechanism as to how the community would be involved within that master plan.

I have been able to look at the way the Jerrabomberra master plan is being developed. It is in its very initial stages. The contractors that have been brought in to develop that master plan engaged the community and stakeholders before they even put pen to paper. They wanted ideas before they moved forward and developed the master plan. They wanted the basis of the community's concerns at an initial stage. Too often we have seen our plans of management and other documents developed almost as a fait accompli with community consultation being an afterthought. I am impressed with the way the Jerrabomberra process has started. I hope it continues in the same way. I hope that the development of a master plan for Tidbinbilla can go the same way.

We are also concerned about how best to involve the community within the board of Tidbinbilla. Certainly, my understanding is that it is not as representative of the community as it possibly could be. We would suggest that there are opportunities for interested organisations like our own—like the Friends of Tidbinbilla et cetera—to become heavily involved in the actual management of Tidbinbilla. We certainly have an interest. Those organisations definitely have an interest. We are very concerned about how we can best get our views across to the board.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Is that helpful, Alistair?

MR COE: Yes, it is. I might ask a follow-up. There are, of course, some threshold issues and decisions to be made with regard to commercial operators, accommodation and the like, but how confident is the association that the master plan or the draft plan of management is actually going to shape the way the park is managed on a day-to-day basis at a grassroots level?

Mr Griffiths: The master plan will only deal with certain issues. The plan of management itself should be the driving document for day-to-day management of the reserve. That is what actually happens with other jurisdictions—other reserves within the ACT. We know, through talking to the rangers within the ACT, that they make reference back to the plans of management. That is why they are so important. They are that reference point that the rangers can go back to and say, "These are the priorities that we have to address. We can work it out through our budgets, but these are the priorities that we have to address and they have been approved through the consultation process." The master plan will address certain issues, particularly in

relation to the commercialisation and accommodation issues. As I said, I hope that the master plan development embraces community consultation in that process.

Ms Goonrey: Could I just add to that, Alistair. I have got the list here of the management actions and priorities. The thing that is significantly missing from that is any process for regular reporting and measurement. I think we have to keep repeating to ourselves that what we measure is what we manage for. There is no measurement of environmental or conservation outcomes in the ACT budget. In fact, the single measure of the Parks, Conservation and Lands budget allocation, as far as we can tell, is visitor satisfaction. For Tidbinbilla, which focuses so strongly on conservation, there is no measurement and there are no deadlines, just “medium, ongoing, high, ongoing”. This is rubbish. I am sorry to be harsh, but it is rubbish. It is wonderful having all of the good statements about what is going to happen and that it is wonderful for the rangers and the operators out there to say that this is what we need to be doing, but nobody is actually going to be able to come back and say: “Did you do it? When did you do it? What impact did it have and how much did it cost?” It is significantly lacking in this and in other ACT management plans.

Mr Griffiths: Can I just say one more thing on that, Madam Chair. This has been an issue that we have raised, that there is a lack of community oversight of the outcomes. There may be internal oversight, but it needs that transparency to get it out to the community and say, “Yes, our reserves are being managed in the way that we think they should be.”

THE CHAIR: Ms Le Couteur?

MS LE COUTEUR: Thank you, Madam Chair. I have to agree with you about the indicators. It is something that we have been talking about at budget time for a few years. They do not poll the native inhabitants of the—

THE CHAIR: Can we have a question?

MS LE COUTEUR: Yes. Can you tell me a bit more about why Nil Desperandum should not be hired out? It says here that there would be a plan of management if it was hired out. Presumably, that will reflect the heritage and conservation issues. If this was done properly—

Mr Griffiths: The National Parks Association does not disagree with the idea that our heritage buildings can be utilised for community accommodation. We see that actually already happening within Namadgi at, say, Gudgenby cottage, where there is a quite wonderful process of having community groups hire the heritage building there for various events. They also have the artist in residence process that has been there for a number of years and they have been very successful.

Where we have a concern is when it moves into a commercial process. There is then a commercial interest in how these areas are managed and it may be to the detriment of other groups within the ACT. We see that it is necessary for there to be equity in access to our accommodation within our reserve systems. That is probably the key thing that concerns our organisation—that we do see equity and that the heritage values are not compromised in seeking a commercial outcome.

Ms Goonrey: Again, if I can just add to that. Conservation Volunteers Australia advertised their tours, which included overnight stays at Nil Desperandum. Community groups have been very keen to get back in to Nil Desperandum. It is a very strong part of our heritage, our experience, and a lot of members want to take their children and grandchildren there, as they went there themselves on their first camping experience. They were told they could not access Nil Desperandum. We are working against that information that commercial operators had access to Nil Desperandum. Community groups, who were the traditional long-term users of that facility, did not and still do not, as we understand it, have access. So it seems to be a case of, “No, you can’t have it because it’s a commercial operation.”

MS LE COUTEUR: So you do not have an objection per se to accommodation use in Nil Desperandum—assuming there is a proper plan of management, heritage is looked after and all of that—it is just that you have an objection to commercial use?

Ms Goonrey: To exclusive commercial use. I understand that was the selling point of those tours—that people would be allowed to go somewhere where nobody else went. It was marketed as, “If you don’t go with this group, you can’t stay there and if you don’t go with this group, you can’t go up Camel Back.” By going with this group there is this locked gate access. Our national parks have no great iconic features. We do not have massive waterfalls. We have fabulous birdlife but we do not have these big things. We do not have seals or dolphins. Our understanding, from watching the development of ecotourism over the past 10 years in the ACT, is that there is this locked gate access, “We will take you somewhere where nobody else can go.” It appears—and we are speaking external to the government’s processes—that Nil Desperandum was being marketed as, “If you don’t go with us, you can’t go there.”

MS LE COUTEUR: So you would not have a problem with some commercial use if the community had use as well?

Ms Goonrey: If it was respectful. The words “adaptive management” concern me because in other jurisdictions it usually means that they will put in facilities that modern tourism people expect. The whole national landscapes tourism project, which has informed this process, was about appealing to the very well-off international tourists who expected extra services. They were adventurous and wanted to go places nobody else could go but, when they got there, they wanted a soft bed. So as long as Nil Desperandum is not fitted out with mosquito nets and charmingly decorated bedrooms and as long as the adaptive reuse is very minimal—

MS LE COUTEUR: The heritage part obviously needs to be respected.

Ms Goonrey: Absolutely. It really needs to be seen as it is. Gudgenby cottage, for example, is refitted as in the 1920s, other than the very modern stove and refrigerator, I have to say. That sort of thing in Nil Desperandum would be really out of character. If you put a refrigerator in Nil Desperandum, you have moved away from that whole wonderful rich history of, “I’m not unpacking my china until I have a decent cottage to live in,” which is the history of Nil Desperandum. That stuff needs to be maintained there. Community groups are very respectful of that and very appreciative. I am concerned that commercialisation of the site might lead to the refrigerators, the soft

camping tents and platforms.

Mr Griffiths: Gudgenby cottage is a wonderful example of how to regenerate a community heritage asset for community use. It is respectful of the history of that building. That is what we would be expecting from any use of Nil Desperandum.

MS LE COUTEUR: Are you aware of any positive advantages potentially from letting out Nil Desperandum? I was thinking particularly of what has been in the *Canberra Times* recently about the disrespectful, to say the least, use of the national parks. I could probably say a lot worse than that, but what about the possibility of having some passive surveillance and reducing some of the incidents?

Mr Griffiths: Certainly Tidbinbilla per se, or the area around Tidbinbilla, does seem to attract a little bit of antisocial behaviour. If you speak to the landholders in that area, they do note problems, certainly on the roads et cetera around there. I know that people have actually broken into Tidbinbilla at various times and had interesting joy rides around in their vehicles. It falls heavily on the local community to monitor those things, and that is a heavy burden on those local landholders. There are maybe some possibilities. Again, it is about whether we are also providing extra access to these antisocial behaviours to get closer to the centre of our breeding program and monitoring of our captive wildlife program.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned earlier how the contract should be managed, in your opinion, and how important those contracts were. The planning and environment committee in the last term went to look at some ecotourism experiences in Queensland, and there was very much a joint approach with the conservation community and the Indigenous community, at all levels of government—local, state and federal—in actually managing those processes. One of the features that I was particularly attracted to was the fact that contracts were dependent on the particular commercial or other entities meeting measurable conservation outcomes, as you were saying before, Christine, regarding the way that you want to see measurable outcomes in the documentation. Have you had any experience of any of those kinds of things that you could talk about now, that you would see as a good example of what could be achieved?

Ms Goonrey: We tend to collect the bad examples, I am afraid, because they do illustrate an over-reaching by tourism interests. For example, with Seal Rocks, there has been an article in the paper recently that an attempt to commercialise the visitor experience at Seal Rocks in Victoria led to the company that was granted the contract actually suing the Victorian government. I think there was either a \$58 million or an \$88 million payout. There is such a wide disparity between promises that are made about ecotourism and the actual deliveries.

I know that the Lane Cove national park camping area was something of a disgrace until NPWS took it over and it is now a very high level facility, beautifully run and with strong conservation outcomes. I think the assumption that commercial interests do it better than government interests is wrong, and that is a good example of how that does not operate.

The other bad example I can give you is that the Queensland government, I

understand, nominated seven areas for ecotourism development and, upon investigation as a commercial proposition, I think three have fallen out already. I cannot tell you their names. There seems to be a big shift going on whereby, as I say, under national landscapes, the national department of tourism is really pushing ecotourism in our national parks. But as it comes closer and closer to investigation, the local passion is the thing that sells—as you say, the people that know the area.

This is where Conservation Volunteers Australia are doing an excellent job. They have harnessed the local passion that Canberrans have for Tidbinbilla in their volunteer program. Some of my friends are in it and they are absolutely thrilled to be involved in something that is so positive for their community. It is harnessing that local passion that makes it work. All the commercialisation that is coming from bodies such as the Transport and Tourism Forum, which is run by the large tourism providers, is actually missing the mark for the ACT. We have unique and really special experiences and we have very good local tourism providers. They are not getting a look-in. I would be much more comfortable if we were developing it, as we say, within those partnerships.

THE CHAIR: With partnerships, yes.

Ms Goonrey: Yes.

Mr Griffiths: Certainly the Seals Rocks example that Christine has cited raised concerns for me. We do not want to rush in to try and commercialise. We do not want to offer opportunities, outcomes, for commercial providers that may not actually happen. That is why it is important to get our planning right in the first place.

Ms Goonrey: Can I add that this is more than just Tidbinbilla. Our previous Chief Minister flagged that what he saw happening at Tidbinbilla he would like to take over to the sanctuary at Mulligans Flat and out to Jerrabomberra wetlands, and he actually mentioned Conservation Volunteers Australia as the provider. That did seem to die in a heap, and we were quite pleased about that, because of the lack of contestability. But there is certainly, in the bureaucracy, a sense that, “We’ll do it in Tidbinbilla and then we’ll just transfer it to these other areas.” So there is more at risk here than just Tidbinbilla.

THE CHAIR: Alistair, have you got another question?

MR COE: Yes, I do. Page 68 of the draft plan of management makes reference to fire ecology. I notice that in the ACT the strategic bushfire management plan has not been updated since 2009. I believe this is an issue that the NPA has raised as well. What role should the bushfire management plan have and how should it interact with the draft management plan?

Mr Griffiths: I am going to let my bushfire expert answer that.

Ms Goonrey: I think that we have established pretty soundly that the strategic bushfire management plan, in its current iteration and with this 15-year rolling plan that has been developed, is really quite effective. I am speaking now as a member of the ACT Bushfire Council. I think what we have in place is a really good process of

watching year by year what is achieved under that plan, specifically where, and how that reveals our weaknesses and how that is protecting our community.

Tidbinbilla, as we know, was devastated by fire. There was quite an intelligent conservation approach to fire management in Tidbinbilla, and probably this rolling 15-year program is the best way of managing bushfire management in Tidbinbilla. But I think that the conservation values have to be pre-eminent in that area (a) because of the devastation and (b) because of its role in tourism and with the lower valley public access use. I think that the bushfire plan is doing its job. Does that answer your question?

MR COE: Yes. In terms of how it interacts with the Tidbinbilla plan, is there scope for more reference to it? I am curious as to whether there is potentially going to be any conflict between the plans.

Ms Goonrey: I believe not, because the bushfire management plan is concentrating on the balance between protection of life, property, and conservation values. I think that is the big difference that has been introduced in the 2009 version over the 2005 version. Conservation values were built into the 2009 strategic bushfire management plan so that everything now is balanced against the protection of life first, property, and conservation. So I think that the Tidbinbilla fire management will be able to operate quite effectively. But as to whether there should be further and closer reference, to tell you the truth, I did not look at it closely this time around.

Mr Griffiths: No. Because you do not get a hard copy, it is sometimes a bit hard to make easy reference to this revised version. Certainly, we did raise an issue about the fact that there was not a clear link between the operational plan, the bushfire annual plan, and the strategic bushfire management plan. The key thing that we would be looking for is to get that strategic view of how bushfire management is implemented within the Tidbinbilla precinct.

Ms Goonrey: I am sorry; you are right. It is coming back to me now. The plan did not refer to it. It more or less said it will manage all of this bushfire planning without reference. And it does need to go back to the strategic bushfire management plan, which incorporates these rolling 15-year plans that it has for Tidbinbilla, as it does for the whole of the ACT natural estate.

MS LE COUTEUR: From what you are saying you would be happy with a mixed use of the area but you would prefer to see the commercial outside. In your submission you say:

... the NPA ACT strongly believes that the community is better served by placing commercially run accommodation outside of reserve areas.

You were saying mixed use and then you were saying—

Mr Griffiths: We see that mixed use could be run by the ACT government. There is the Lane Cove example where the NPWS is able to provide accommodation services. We have always seen that with commercialisation of our reserves it can disadvantage the community as a whole, the local community, to be bringing in an organisation that

is outside our local community. It gets very focused within the reserve, there is a lot of commercial activity within the reserve, which then does not flow out to the people who are around it, the local community, that we really want to see benefit from activities within our reserve system—so that the ACT as a whole benefits, not necessarily specific commercial activities.

Ms Goonrey: If you look in the broad, this is the National Parks Australia Council policy on this—all of the national parks associations. Mixed use implies that people are coming in, enjoying it, getting a really good experience from being in a natural estate. However, when they eat, wash, go to the toilet and sleep, that is the heavy impact part of that experience, and that heavy impact part is best dealt with outside the borders of a national park, simply because the borders have been drawn with very clear respect to the conservation values. So a five, 10, 15-minute trip away from those borders, in order to keep those heavy impact activities away, we think is a reasonable trade-off so that people can enjoy the region but not have those sewerage, food, waste issues.

If you look at some of our really high impact areas, such as the ski resorts in Kosciuszko, and look at some of the inadvertent offshoots, the loss of the Burramys pygmy possum around Perisher is almost exclusively due to the fact that feral cats developed and the population grew significantly by feeding on scraps from the tourist accommodation there. It was completely inadvertent but that was a very direct threat to a threatened species.

That is the sort of thing that happens when you actually bring people in, set them down, build them accommodation, have the toilets, have the sewerage, have the food trucks coming in, have the garbage sitting there for two or three days. It is almost impossible to control those sorts of impacts. It is best outside the park, with the rich, full experience within the park.

Mr Griffiths: The key thing about having it outside the park is that that is where the infrastructure already is. With those issues that Christine is raising, we would have to develop all of that sewerage, improve the water et cetera. That is why the accommodation issue needs to be very carefully looked at. How can we best do it on a sustainable basis?

THE CHAIR: Ms Le Couteur, do you have another question?

MS LE COUTEUR: Yes. I would like to now move to the tours, the use of vehicles. You said in your opening remarks that you thought it was going to be dangerous. Can you elaborate on why it is going to be dangerous? Is it just that I would be wandering around in a totally different headspace, not expecting a vehicle to turn up behind me?

Mr Griffiths: Certainly the track that they are proposing to use, which is a fire trail, is an incredibly steep fire trail and it does actually occasionally get used by mountain bikers. It gets used quite regularly by walkers. It is the major route for people to get to the Tidbinbilla Range in the Camel Back area. There are some sharp turns on it. It is a surface that is difficult to walk on at times. To meet a vehicle could be quite an experience if you were not in a position to get out of the way easily. Even though it is a reasonably wide fire trail, I can see from my own experience that I would not like to

meet a vehicle, or meet many vehicles, going up that track.

THE CHAIR: Currently it is used by the rangers in their four-wheel drives, I would imagine.

Mr Griffiths: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: So there is vehicle access—

Mr Griffiths: That is correct.

THE CHAIR: to those areas through locked gates?

Mr Griffiths: Yes.

THE CHAIR: So if it was used by other vehicles, it would be through those locked gates with permission and with meeting strict guidelines, one would imagine.

Mr Griffiths: Yes.

THE CHAIR: So they could be restricted with respect to numbers of vehicles and people could actually be notified as to when they would be travelling on those roads?

Mr Griffiths: That is a possibility. People are able to not be informed when they are going out—people like me who do not necessarily go in through the standard approach but who may be coming down. Walks that I have done may come in from outside Tidbinbilla, then go up through Mount Domain and then come down the fire trails. Just having information at the base or even at the business centre may not actually inform everyone who is a user of that fire trail. They can come in from the other end of the Tidbinbilla Range as well because the fire trail continues all the way along the range to the north.

THE CHAIR: And that would be through locked gates as well, would it not?

Mr Griffiths: It would be through locked gates as well. But walkers, riders et cetera are able to negotiate those quite easily.

THE CHAIR: Yes, of course. So it would be very important for an education program to go alongside any access by limited four-wheel drive.

Mr Griffiths: Yes. The issue with the rangers is that there are not necessarily as many vehicles going up. What we are doing with commercial operations is increasing the number of vehicles on there. We then have to ask what are the management numbers and what is the load that is sustainable for that. So we can see lots of issues associated with the fact that we are increasing access to a national park component of Tidbinbilla.

Ms Goonrey: I have never seen more than one ranger vehicle at a time whereas the tours propose three or four vehicles. So if you can imagine a walking party of perhaps 10 people and three or four vehicles on some of those sharp corners, as Rod says, it is not a pretty thought.

THE CHAIR: So it is important that they be restricted in the speed at which they can travel. Are you suggesting that they would go in convoys? Is that what you are suggesting?

Ms Goonrey: I do not like either. A convoy on some of those sharp corners is impossible. You actually need a run-up. You need a constant pace. I know it is a category 1 fire trail and it is designed for low-loaders. It must be taken very slowly. But with a convoy—and what about ice? On the other hand, to be walking there in a walking group—and it is a very popular walking group destination because the views are spectacular when you get there and it is quite a safe trip for beginners—to have one car, 10 minutes later have another vehicle and then 10 minutes later have another vehicle, it just puzzles me as to why it is there, other than that it is a locked gate. Why go there?

THE CHAIR: We are talking hypothetically, anyway, because it could be just one vehicle—

Ms Goonrey: Yes.

THE CHAIR: once a day or something. It would give access to people with disabilities, one would imagine, to that experience. Obviously some people would not be able to walk as it would be just physically impossible for them to be able to walk but they could actually travel in a vehicle to observe.

Ms Goonrey: That is a really interesting question and I have a lot of sympathy for people with disabilities. This is somebody who pushed her mother in a wheelchair 100 metres up the Kosciuszko track so that she could once again experience something which she loved as a child. I have a lot of sympathy for people with disabilities getting access to these places, but we have to look at giving people with disabilities genuine experiences rather than turning them into commercial tours. Where is the access by people with disabilities to, say, the valley floor? Where can we take people in wheelchairs so that they can experience some of the things that the rest of us do? Let us deal with people with disabilities when we have actually given them the other experiences as well. I think we might find that it has probably become a little bit extraneous at that point.

There is a real resentment in the community that walkers can go to places that vehicles cannot. And if I cannot walk—as I can't; I have had my knee redone and I can't walk in the places I used to—it is not about access; it is actually about the conservation values. It is actually about wheeled vehicles doing damage; therefore we must restrict wheeled vehicles. Where we have access tracks, and it is always our concern about putting in access trails, you then get the argument, "Look, it's there, why don't we use it?"

So we have this accumulation of use that comes in. We have to draw a line. We have to say, "Yes, that is a very good track and, yes, we could take people up there and, yes, we could charge them." But it is actually about the conservation values. There is one particular corner there called Lyrebird Corner. The thought that that could be inundated with vehicles—it is just such a magic spot; you always hear a lyrebird there.

Maybe the lyrebirds will start to repeat vehicle sounds instead of other birds. There is a magic about being out there for people who can go there. But it is not about the personal experience; it is actually about the conservation values.

That is why these small paths are set aside. This is for nature. These bits are for nature. We must manage them but we must not impose our human values to the point where we actually destroy the conservation values.

THE CHAIR: Mr Coe, do you have another question?

MR COE: Yes. The NPA submission mentions the criteria for determining whether events such as orienteering are appropriate to take place in the park. As it stands at the moment, do you believe there is consistency with regard to the events that are being approved versus the ones that are not being approved?

Mr Griffiths: Sorry, Mr Coe, I missed the last part of your sentence.

MR COE: Do you think there is consistency at the moment with regard to the events which are being approved to take place in the park as opposed to the ones that are being rejected?

Mr Griffiths: The events that I am aware of within Tidbinbilla at the moment tend to be ones sponsored through the ACT government—the Tidbinbilla Extravaganza, focusing primarily on the valley floor. In fact, that is probably quite a good use of the valley floor. It allows people to come out and experience the wonders of the vistas that are available from that floor region. We have been arguing in the NPA that we need to have clear criteria for the managers of our reserves about what events are available or can be used within those reserves that allow sustainable event use.

My organisation certainly did have concerns in Namadgi about an orienteering event where quite a number of vehicles were being proposed to go into Gudgenby. We worked with the ACT parks and conservation service and the ACT orienteering service to ensure that a study was conducted into what those impacts were from such a significant event and whether there were long-term detrimental issues coming out of that event. That study is still being wrapped up. It does take a long time to see what the long-term effects are. So we are waiting on the impacts of that.

That is what we look for in events and the criteria for events. Is there a scientific basis for what the impact of any event is going to be? Where we are talking about a nature conservation reserve then the emphasis has to be on whether there are going to be detrimental effects on those conservation values. Within the Tidbinbilla floor it is legislated as a special purpose reserve so there is more of an emphasis on events happening there and it is probably more suited for those sorts of things as opposed to getting into the national parks component of Tidbinbilla. It would be quite interesting to see an event on some of the slopes of Mount Domain.

We can see that there is potential for Tidbinbilla to hold events but it needs to be done in such a way that there is a scientific basis and that as much as possible the plan of management provides clear guidance for the managers of this reserve and other reserves through all the plans of management as to what events are permissible and

what are not.

Ms Goonrey: If we turn it on its head, the thing that concerns me is that, if I am a person wishing to organise a major sporting event in the ACT, we have no recreation strategy for the ACT. I do not know where I can go. I do not know what is permissible where, and I think that is a significant gap in ACT land management policy, and has been for some time. For example, that very large bicycle event that went from Kowen Forest through Black Mountain and out the other side outraged conservationists because it actually went right through a nature reserve. But I have some sympathy for the organisers who say, “Well, where can we have it because we don’t know?”

We have this constant clash between people who want to manage and put on large attractions which will bring people to the ACT and we have no guidance for them across the ACT as to where it is permissible, possible or best to run those sorts of things. So a Tidbinbilla management plan has to operate more or less in isolation, “Well, we don’t want this and we don’t want that,” rather than saying where you can have these major events.

Mr Griffiths: We know that the parks and conservation service has been looking at trying to establish an outdoor recreation strategy. We believe that an outdoor recreation strategy should encompass all of the public land within the ACT and provide clear opportunities or inform users of where best to maintain a recreation activity. We have certainly been calling in various submissions for the need to have an outdoor recreation strategy resourced because I think that is the thing that is holding it back.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I am aware that it is in development. Ms Le Couteur, did you have one quick question?

MS LE COUTEUR: A very quick one but I think I may already know the answer. There are obviously a lot of negatives with vehicle traffic. Are there any conditions under which you think it would be feasible? I suspect that I know the answer.

Ms Goonrey: If it was me and I was a public servant and I had to deliver on some sort of ecotourism contract, I think that is a sensational view from just below Camel Back. I think it has a lot to teach us about geology, geography, topography, nature—all of those sorts of things. I would bring them in from the other side. I would not bring them through the nature area. I would bring them in from the main road around Murray’s Corner.

Mr Griffiths: It is a lot flatter track in the end, once you are up there.

Ms Goonrey: Yes. You get to the view and, quite frankly, if you are driving through the other part, it is very nice to walk through because you do hear the lyrebirds but it is a pretty boring drive. But if you bring them in from the other side you can still see the spectacular view. You can still have a picnic in one of the most sensational places, I think, in Australia. But you have not actually compromised those nature park values.

THE CHAIR: I think we will wrap it up now, Mr Coe. Is that okay with you?

MR COE: Yes, that is fine.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Griffiths and Ms Goonrey, for your time today. We will send you a copy of the transcript. If you can see any glaring errors, you can let us know. If members have further questions they will certainly get them to you. You have not taken any questions on notice that I am aware of.

Ms Goonrey: The only thing I have promised is to try to get you good examples of partnerships.

THE CHAIR: That is right. If you can get some good examples, that would be terrific; get those to the secretary. Thanks very much for your time today.

Mr Griffiths: Thank you for the opportunity to present.

Ms Goonrey: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 11.01 am.