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, 31 MAY 2012

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

WITNESSES

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Amended 9 August 2011

The committee met at 2.04 pm.

FIGGIS, MS PENELOPE, private capacity

THE CHAIR: Ms Figgis, welcome to the hearing of the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water via teleconference. I open this third public hearing for the inquiry into current and potential ecotourism in the ACT and region. I just remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement that I believe our secretary has sent to you.

Ms Figgis: That is right.

THE CHAIR: Could you just confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Ms Figgis: I do.

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

Ms Figgis: Yes, just a limited statement. I have been involved in the debate and discussion around ecotourism for a very long time, principally from the point of view of an environmentalist who was deeply concerned with biodiversity conservation but also as somebody who was, for six years, a director of the Australian Tourist Commission.

In that capacity I became very interested in the whole issue. I developed a great understanding of the importance of the tourism industry to Australia, including its potential to be a great force for conservation in the sense that its basic infrastructure, its basic resource, in many cases was not just the friendliness and openness of Australia, the safety of Australia and the vibrancy of cities. Certainly, an absolutely core part of its brand was the protected areas of Australia and our thriving wildlife and the beauty of our landscapes. That was a very strong interest and I took part in that discussion a great deal.

I have also been party, though, to the debate about there being two sides of the sword, so to speak, two edges of the sword—that is, tourism does have a high potential to present the natural world to people, to give them wonderful experiences, and hopefully, through those experiences, to enhance their commitment to long-term conservation.

The other side of the sword, of course, has been seen in many parts of the world where people take a beautiful place, whether that be natural or cultural, it becomes very popular and it becomes a popular commodity, but the development around that area, or servicing that area, is not done with sensitivity. It grows out of control and in the end, I suppose, using the cliche, it kills the golden goose in that the area becomes degraded or overrun and it is not as attractive and ecologically valuable as it was before.

Basically, the key issues that I believe are necessary to ensure that ecotourism does

bring benefits to regional economies, benefits to climate and all the economic benefits that tourism can bring without damaging the basic resource which it rents are basically good planning and ensuring that it is what I call "nature centred", in the sense that the tourism is a constrained activity within the natural area rather than the leading activity or the shaping activity.

I think it is incumbent upon all ecotourism operators and people encouraging ecotourism to look to the net benefit that the tourism activity will bring to the core purpose of the area, to biodiversity. How will the tourism product actually enhance or add to it? There are many examples that I can give of where that, in fact, has been in place.

Overall, I am a supporter of ecotourism, I am a supporter of many ecotourism operators, who I know have strong ethics and are very interested in contributing to the conservation effort of this country, and I am a supporter of the current process of the commonwealth government called "natural landscapes", which is encouraging tourism and park conservation services to work more closely together.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for that. Just going back, you were talking about some examples that you could give of some successful ecotourism projects, if you like.

Ms Figgis: There are certainly a large number of ecotourism operators around Australia, and I have written papers on this. There are examples of where you have good operators who are enhancing the tourism product. I take construction as an example. I can think of Crystal Creek in northern New South Wales which is a rainforest property, an accommodation property. Those people did not just put up accommodation; they actually took an area that was, to a certain degree, degraded. It had been used as a dairy property, I believe. They greatly enhanced the plantings; they were restored. They did a lot of fencing off of natural areas so that they were not degraded by stock and they replanted, to a very large degree, the rainforest plants of that area. That is a good example of where people cannot just build in a nice natural area and claim some sort of green credentials, but they are actually adding something.

Another example of that is Couran Cove on Stradbroke Island. Again, the property that they bought was quite severely degraded. The whole area had been grazed. It was causing a lot of seepage of acid sulphate soils into the surrounding waters. That was actually developed by a famous runner—

THE CHAIR: Ron Clarke?

Ms Figgis: Ron Clarke; thank you. He was the developer of that. He put an enormous amount of money and effort into the sustainability of that property by securing this leaking acid sulphate soil system—quite innovative practices which stopped the pollution problem. On the land area, he set up a major native species nursery using local provenance, seeds et cetera, which he used to very substantially replant and restore the native vegetation. All the development itself was very carefully done with sustainable materials—bamboo floors and natural paints. All sorts of efforts were made. The buildings were all on stilts and they had no floor impact, so that animals could move back and forth—that sort of thing. There are many examples of accommodation that have done that.

Of course the actual tourism operation itself can be part of tourism management. I think of operators in the Little Desert. I have forgotten the names at the moment; I should have looked them up—a major operator in the Little Desert in Victoria. Basically that tourism product involved families going out to the property to do various conservation tasks, if you like. They might be monitoring the number of birds, they might be bird banding or they might be tracking to monitor the numbers of particular creatures et cetera. The whole nature of the tourism product was the environmental management of the desert ecosystem. Of course there are major operators such as Earthwatch who work on that whole principle, as do Conservation Volunteers Australia, where they are basically making a tourism product out of constructive conservation action.

THE CHAIR: Has your organisation ever advocated against ecotourism in particular areas or a particular place on conservation grounds?

Ms Figgis: Not my organisation but we are not an NGO. The Australian Committee for the IUCN, or IUCN in general, is not an NGO. It is a common misunderstanding that we are, but we are not. We are made up of government members—for example, the Australian government is a member, as are many other governments and government agencies in Australia. So we do not operate as an NGO. We are apolitical. I would not say that we never have any advocacy role but it tends to be slight.

However, for 17 years I have been the Vice-President of the Australian Conservation Foundation. In that capacity I have been very involved in quite a lot of advocacy activities. Certainly there were developments that ACF opposed—for example, a quite large-scale resort in the Wilpena Pound in South Australia, and a cable car up to Springbrook in the hinterland of the Gold Coast. Similarly, ACF was opposed to the cable car out of Cairns up to Kuranda. In almost all of those cases there was a view that these were large-scale commercial activities in protected areas. That has been the general position of most NGOs in Australia. Basically they say we have limited areas declared as protected areas and that particularly large-scale commercial activities should not take place in protected areas.

MS PORTER: Ms Figgis, I am interested in the last statements you made about commercial entities. I am thinking about Queensland because I was on a committee in the last Assembly that went to Queensland to have a look at ecotourism, and in a number of communities around Australia. We experienced the cable car from Cairns. We went out onto the reef with commercial providers as well, and we went into the rainforest with other commercial providers at that particular time.

It appeared from what we saw and from what we heard from government officials at all levels, as well as the Indigenous population and the providers, that things were seemingly working okay, particularly in relation to the regime they have there of the carrot approach: "If you look after the environment and you work with us, you can get a long-term contract or licence." Do you have any comments about that approach and whether you think it is working, now that those things have been established?

Ms Figgis: Yes. Please do not misunderstand me. I have no objection to tourism operators in parks at all. In fact, on the contrary, I think it is an important part of

building the support for our parks that we do encourage visitation, and that we encourage visitation across the spectrum. I do not agree with some of my colleagues who do tend to have an attitude that it should only be, if you like, rugged bushwalkers. I would like to see far more Australian families, or families from anywhere, ordinary people, enjoying our parks very much. And very often that will be with a commercial operator. I do not think that is problematic.

In particular, I know through my colleagues on the Great Barrier Reef that they have very good relationships with very responsible tourism operators. I think most people do feel that, and, even though my organisation did oppose the cable car at Kuranda, it has proved to be a good experience. Mind you, I would have to say that a lot of their better practices that they claim actually came about because of the opposition. For example, they were going to put roads in to put all the stanchions in, which would have had a lot of impact. Because of the pressure, they put them in by helicopter and it did lessen the impact on the forest very considerably.

Overall, around Australia, I have sat on the Northern Territory parks board, for example, I have sat on the Uluru board and I have been on the consultative committee for the Great Barrier Reef. With all of these bodies I have seen good relationships developing with tourism. The thing that I do believe that environmental groups are rightly concerned about is that there is a push for our real estate, so to speak. Let us face it: our parks are often our most beautiful and wonderful environments. They are beautiful bits of real estate. And there is a bit of a push for, if you like, high-end, high-yield, more than $1,000 a day tourism product in parks. I think that has to be questioned quite seriously because I do believe that that is the thin end of the wedge. If I were to encourage any tourism development at any time in any parks, it would be family friendly, not this high-end, very exclusive style of tourism which I know is popular with many, for the obvious reason that it is high yield. But that is not the end of tourism that interests me, certainly.

MR SESELJA: You talked about some good examples of ecotourism. Could you expand on, either in Australia or overseas, some particularly bad ones and what can be learnt from those, where there have been mistakes made? Are you able to point to a couple of examples for us to avoid?

Ms Figgis: I think the classic examples you see in places in Thailand. I do not know if you know Phang Nga Bay and places like that. They are really of world heritage quality with magnificent past landscapes, but the entire infrastructure that is going in for tourists has no sewerage, for example. All the restaurants are on stilts and all the waste goes directly into the bay itself. Ha Long Bay in Vietnam is another good example of a world heritage, natural environment with quite a strong ecology where the same sort of thing is happening—a very large scale resort development but very poor environmental practices.

There are many good examples. I am a week back from Costa Rica. Costa Rica is a very different story indeed. It is a very interesting country generally. They found in the 1960s that they, like all other Central American nations, were losing their forests and they put a levy on petrol. That ended the dramas. We have had our mining taxes et cetera. They used that to pay farmers to plant trees and to hold their forests. They have increased their forest cover. It had got as low as 21 per cent and it is now up to

56 per cent.

They reaped the benefits from ecotourism, nature-based tourism. They are known all over the world for their magnificent birds and the beauty of their landscape. They have done things very well. They do have more commercial development near their parks, but very often it is on private land adjacent to parks, which the government has strongly encouraged. It is a really outstanding example. They have a lot of private, protected areas that are run by foundations. The most famous of the Costa Rican reserves is Monte Verde, or the green mountain. They have accommodation there on half the park, but it is very simple and inexpensive and any family could afford to stay there.

Those are a couple of good and bad examples. In Australia we have not had a lot of really bad examples, although I have to say that one of the examples that many of my colleagues would point to as the primary thing they are concerned about would be Kosciuszko. As you would recall, way back the original proposal was that Thredbo would be a very small village. If you go back to the documentation at the time, it was only going to be on one side of the river. It was only going to be "this" big and it was not going to expand if there were any problems with the sewerage system et cetera.

But once you get a substantial commercial operator into a protected area, it becomes a powerful political force and an economic driver. For better or for worse, we tend to listen more to economic arguments than to ecological ones. So over time the arguments were put that Thredbo was not economically viable at a certain size. It had to get bigger. It was not economically viable, being seasonally based, so it had to have some facilities. They said: "Oh dear, we can't put some of the facilities on that side of the river. We'll have to go to the other side of the river. The sewerage system isn't working. Never mind, we still need to expand even though we haven't solved the sewerage system issues," et cetera. Many of my colleagues will look at something like that and say, "That's not the way we want to go in our most previous conservation areas."

MR SESELJA: Are there any tangible impacts of that, in your opinion? Has there been a degradation of the landscape area at Kosciuszko as a result of the development of Thredbo?

Ms Figgis: Obviously, many people think so. I am not an expert on Kosciuszko, but I think people believe that the expansion of the town—and, certainly, I do not know where we are up to with the pollution of the river. For many years there was a problem with the pollution of the river which almost certainly would have had ecological impacts. Whether they are long lasting I am afraid I cannot comment; I simply do not know.

MS PORTER: I have not been up there for many years, but I do recall, after trudging the 20 kilometres or so of the long route, when I got up there I was quite disappointed to find that I was surrounded by crowds of people who were perched on every available rock eating their lunch. I am sorry to say that some of those people were not very careful about what they did with their leftovers. So it was a bit disappointing.

Ms Figgis: I think we are very lucky in this country in the main. Most of our tourism

operators in the environmental field have gone into it because they love nature themselves. Most of them are people who are not just exploiting something. They are people who want to showcase things they find beautiful and wonderful. Most of them, I am sure, do not want to do any damage.

Having said that, I believe it is incumbent upon governments not to presume that everybody is going to be so well motivated and, I guess, to make policy to prevent the entry of people who may be less well motivated. The sort of thing that is happening worldwide which I am very ambivalent about, which I did see again in Costa Rica, is the wish for infrastructure to be put into parks to make them entertaining. The classic example of that is the zip line. I know there are some people in Australia who would say: "What's wrong with that? Why don't we make our national parks more fun?

I do not know whether you know what a zip line is. It is basically what we would all call a very large flying fox. People would say: "That's fun. Why don't we do that?" But somehow or other I have to say that I felt it kind of missed the point. Here we were in a magnificent globally important rainforest and most of the kids there were zipping along on a zip line, which I am sure had nothing to do with the environmental values of the area. I just felt it could have been somewhere else. I have no hang-ups about kids having fun—there is nothing wrong with that—but I did not see why it had to be in the middle of a really magnificent area. When you are zipping along at a very fast pace, you are not actually looking for hummingbirds; you are having a bit of an adrenalin rush.

As I say, I have got no problem with that, but it is the sort of the thing that I would not like to see in our parks. I do not think it is appropriate. I think if we are going to have infrastructure it should be to help people enjoy the experience, enhance it and to celebrate the values for which we have set those areas aside.

THE CHAIR: I understand that your organisation established an ecotourism consultancy program. That was way back in 1992.

Ms Figgis: Who was that?

THE CHAIR: Your organisation; is that right?

Ms Figgis: No, I think there is some confusion there. The Australian Committee for the IUCN or—

THE CHAIR: That is what I understood but that may not be the case?

Ms Figgis: No, that is not correct. I personally have been a consultant on tourism, as an individual, but that is just—

THE CHAIR: We do have your CV here, so yes we do know about that. Having regard to your experience, and not just in your consultancy, you do lecture in this area and so on.

Ms Figgis: I do, yes.

THE CHAIR: Can you point us to where we could find some more examples and cases that would allow us to know what those better conservation focused ecotourism projects or places in Australia are, even near the ACT, just to get some idea about what makes a good ecotourism experience or operation?

Ms Figgis: I am sure you have thought of this or done this already, but I suppose the most obvious place to go is the Ecotourism Association of Australia. The people who seek accreditation through the Ecotourism Association of Australia obviously are some of the people with best practice. So, in a sense, with respect to the client base or the people who carry that accreditation, I am sure the association would give you case studies of those properties, and some very good examples of good practice around Australia.

I certainly have materials that I could send to the inquiry, but my materials are a little bit out of date in detail, simply because I have been working on other things in the last couple of years, so they are not absolutely up to date. But I could certainly send you some examples of things that I have cited in the past as very good examples.

THE CHAIR: That could be quite useful. We have spoken to Ms Cheatham at Ecotourism Australia around regulation and accreditation, so we have some understanding of the system that is in place.

Ms Figgis: I am not terribly familiar with any properties in close proximity to the ACT but I would think there probably are some. You look for both properties and for operators. Obviously there are different categories. In the case of accommodation you are looking for sensitive siting, sensitive building materials, the way in which they interpret to their clients. Do they seek a contribution? I would argue that contribution is a key characteristic of true ecotourism. Are they seeking to educate and inspire their visitors about the value of what they are seeing? There are all of those issues.

With the operators themselves, I think it is again about good practices. There is not much point in calling yourself an ecotourism operator and then cleaning your sump in the local stream or whatever. It is about sensitivity to things like the rights of Indigenous people or a contribution to Indigenous people if they are using their lands. Are they obeying the law in terms of wildlife and not going too close to wildlife? It is also about the quality of their educational content. Are they seeking to get people to not just enjoy but really understand the value of what they are seeing? Then there is the issue of contribution. Are they in some way supporting local conservation activity?

I will briefly mention one last thing. I would always look to the relationship between the operators, whether it is in conservation or tours, and the agency. I think of good operators more in terms of relationships. The park agency might say, "Sorry, Joe, but these roads are all churned up after heavy rain," and if the operator says, "All right, I won't use that road," it means they have a cooperative and meaningful relationship.

I do not know whether I am going over my time but I am interested in the motivation behind the inquiry. I did not really find out a lot about that. Is it that you want to present the parks more? Is it that there are pressures to open the parks more? I am not quite sure what is behind it.

THE CHAIR: There was not any incident or any pressure at this time around the issue. My understanding is that a committee of another Assembly in the past had done an inquiry into this area but it had really only focused on the economic benefits. Of course that is only one part of it, as you have explained to us today. So it was felt that because that occurred several years ago, it was time to have a look at this issue. There are opportunities here in the ACT and within the region. If people are going to take up those opportunities or pursue them, we did want to have a good understanding around what sorts of things you would need to put in place and how you would make this a positive thing for the people who are having the experience. Certainly there is the environmental aspect, as you were just talking about, as well as making a contribution and understanding the importance of looking after the place. So it was really just to get—

Ms Figgis: I actually think that you have tremendous potential. It is an unusual capital city, to have such a large national park around it. I do not know to what degree you have developed long-range walking tracks, for example. What is very much a growth area around the world are really attractive, pleasant walking tracks, perhaps with where they might weave to the edge of the park and you could have boutique accommodation, not necessarily on-park but perhaps off-park, where people could stay the night and then take on the next leg of the walk. That sort of thing is extremely popular.

With respect to the idea of doing an audit of the opportunities, I have been on the natural landscapes committee. I am not sure if you are familiar with that but that is a cooperative program between Parks Australia and Tourism Australia to really look at some of the icons of Australia. It is about looking at them more regionally—not to look at Uluru national park but to look at the whole red centre, for example—and at all the components, and not just the parks, and getting everybody working together more, to present a total and very brand-consistent experience.

It seems to me that a lot of good work has come out of that. A lot of that is about really great experiences. I do believe that Canberra is well positioned to do really lovely long-range walking. It is an unusual place in that it is fairly accessible. You have wildlife that is accessible from a major city. There are not too many capital cities in the world where, within about 10 to 15 minutes, you can actually see wildlife, and Canberra has that. Funnily enough, one of the things that I know causes you problems should be one of your greatest assets, and that is kangaroos. The fact that you have a lot of wildlife quite nearby is something that a lot of people in the rest of the world, or even Australians, are very keen to see.

MS PORTER: I want to make a comment around walking. You are exactly right; we have this wonderful asset here that could be utilised in this way. Certainly I can think of other places in Australia where they have those long walks. In Tasmania, for instance—I have gone on some of those down there—it is extremely popular. I think they are very well managed in Tasmania, although you may have some comments on that; you may believe they are not. I was thinking about people with disabilities, for instance. I have seen some examples in Tasmania where they have made an effort to open up areas for people, say, in wheelchairs or who have other disabilities, so that they can actually have access to and see some of the national park area or some of the

natural beauty that they previously did not have access to. How do you see that working? Obviously that does mean special arrangements need to be made.

Ms Figgis: There are ways to do that without massively compromising. I do not think that disabled people want the world paved, necessarily. I think they appreciate wildness as much as anyone else. But I do believe that good park managers know how to do this. A good example is Cradle Mountain. Out of the visitors centre there is a flat boardwalk that is wheelchair accessible and it goes through a very nice piece of forest. You can do such loops. As long as there is a flat surface they can be wheelchair accessible.

Lookouts, for example, where people can enjoy looking out over magnificent scenery, are very important and they should always be designed so that people who are physically disabled in any way can have access to them. I think there are ways of doing this and good park managers know how to do it. It is very often a resource issue because obviously infrastructure is often expensive. I do think it is incumbent upon all of us to try and have that inclusive approach to presenting our wilder areas. But that does not mean that we should pave the world. I do think that there is real scope for wild walking. I think a lot of people really enjoy that.

You can have a range of products. The sort of products that I really like are walks that can be done in stretches. The Larapinta Trail is a good example in Central Australia, in the MacDonnell Ranges. You can either walk a leg of that, and a family could do that with even quite small children, or you can do it over four or five days and keep going. It is that kind of product that I think can be very attractive. Of course you can do that fully independently, if you are able to, or you can do it in a tour group, if you are not confident about walking in the bushland. You could have add-in products like accommodation. Whether that accommodation is in-park or not is another matter. In some cases around the world the accommodation is off-park or adjacent to park. With Cradle Mountain you have cabins within the park.

THE CHAIR: Going to the accreditation and licensing, does your organisation have any input at all into the development of accreditation schemes? Do you have any engagement with Ecotourism Australia?

Ms Figgis: No. The Australian Committee for the IUCN tends to concentrate on national and international issues of concern to IUCN. It is not that it does not have an interest in tourism; it does. But normally it would not have that involvement. The Australian Conservation Foundation certainly did. I was involved in drawing up the ACF policy on tourism. That, in a sense, shaped some of the debate around what was and was not ecotourism, and therefore some of the criteria within the ecotourism accreditation. Certainly I have been involved in lots of conferences over the years where it has been discussed.

I believe that we have come up with a fairly good system in Australia. It is not too onerous but people do have to meet certain standards. I think the good thing about accreditation is that if people put a badge on their bus, on their cabins or on whatever the product happens to be, interestingly enough they also raise the expectation of their clients. They know that there is a certain accountability with that. If you are saying, "I'm green, I've got good standards, I don't damage the environment," you are

certainly adding respect for your product but you are also creating an expectation. It is a bit like a restaurant having a Michelin star or whatever. Once you have that badge on your property, you had better meet those expectations. So I am very much in favour of accreditation.

THE CHAIR: We are getting to the end of the session this afternoon but I do have another question. You mentioned before that it is often helpful to do an audit of an area's ecotourism opportunities.

Ms Figgis: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Could you give us a bit of an idea about how you would go about that? Is there a particular methodology that you use? What is the approach?

Ms Figgis: I do not think I can name a single methodology but you would probably consult someone who was experienced in ecotourism, to really look at the totality of what you have. There are a lot of issues there. It is not just the pretty bits; partly it is the pretty bits, whether they be a waterfall, a gorge, lovely places like Tidbinbilla or whatever. There is certainly your infrastructure. There are your access points. So it is about putting everything together—putting together your seasonality. It is even about putting together things like: when do most people come to the ACT? Can you have add-on events? If you have a big tourism product like Floriade, for example, are there ways that you could add in to that?

You really need an experienced nature tourism person to look at the totality. I would give them the brief to come up with what are the potential products. What are potential economically and ecologically viable products that could be developed, whether that be a long-range walking track, an additional facility like Tidbinbilla, an expansion of an existing area, a different presentation of a particular area, a new access road or something that will make a product viable that was not viable now. That is what I would be looking to do.

THE CHAIR: I would like to thank you for giving evidence this afternoon, Ms Figgis. A copy of the transcript of the proceedings will be sent to you. If there are any errors that need correction, please let our secretary know and that will be taken on board. I would like to thank you again for your contribution this afternoon.

Meeting adjourned from 2.51 to 4 pm.

GRIFFITHS, MR ROD, President, National Parks Association (ACT)
HURLSTONE, MR CLIVE, Committee Member, National Parks Association (ACT)

THE CHAIR: I declare open this fourth public hearing for the inquiry into current and potential ecotourism in the ACT and region. I would like to welcome from the National Parks Association (ACT) Mr Rod Griffiths, the president of the association, and Mr Clive Hurlstone, a committee member of the association. 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 that statement?

Mr Griffiths: I confirm I understand that.

Mr Hurlstone: I confirm that I understand the privilege statement.

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

Mr Griffiths: We thank the committee for the ability to make a presentation to you and allow ourselves to be questioned by you in relation to our submission. Very quickly, there are a number of key points that our submission covered. The things that we would particularly like to draw out include the fact that the inquiry needs to be a broad inquiry, not strictly on the strict definition of ecotourism, which relies heavily on commercial aspects. We think it should be a broader range of activities flowing across certainly the parks and the conservation reserves, which we are particularly interested in, given our organisation's name.

We are particularly interested in the development of a recreation strategy, an outdoor recreation strategy, for the ACT that will guide how best to manage our resources for recreation across the ACT and potentially reduce some of the pressure that our conservation reserves are feeling at the moment with the demands they have from recreation.

We have put forward a number of principles that we believe are relevant for ecotourism. They relate to the need for investing in good quality, low impact park facilities, experiences and services. We also talk about the need for an experience audit, so that people know what is happening and decisions can be made on that basis. We refer to the analysis of visitation patterns, so we actually know what tourists are doing in the ACT, and the need to ensure that any initiatives that are put forward are commercially viable. We have seen a number of initiatives move forward in the ACT which have folded at various times.

We certainly believe there is a need for more data in relation to ecotourism as we move forward in making our policies. We have had recent relationships with key recreation events, particularly the Australian orienteering championships that were held last year in the ACT. We have done a study with that organisation to determine what the impact of that event was on Namadgi national park. We also put forward a proposal for ecotourism in our submission, that being a proposed new national park for the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for that opening statement. I just wanted to go back to one thing you mentioned. You talked about the demands on our parks and reserves. What are those demands?

Mr Griffiths: We have seen it in quite a lot of instances and it is recorded in the report of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment on the Canberra nature park. There is quite a significant demand for people to utilise our parks in terms of both low impact recreation and higher impact recreation. You see events like the recent bike Capital Punishment event. There is just a level of loving the national park. In our reserves in Bruce Ridge, the area was being over-utilised by mountain bikers. We have had to put in a strategy to reduce that. That is why I was indicating that this inquiry should be broader than just simply the commercial aspects of ecotourism. People go to our conservation reserves for a range of activities and they should all be considered as part of the overall strategy of how we manage our reserves for what they are actually set up for.

THE CHAIR: I note that in your submission you refer to the fact that ecotourism in Australia has a definition, but we need to be looking beyond that.

MS PORTER: With regard to the mountain bike matter that you just mentioned, was that a formal organised event or was it people just going out with their mountain bikes and taking advantage of the fact that there are tracks there and wanting to have that experience?

Mr Griffiths: In Bruce Ridge it was that latter scenario. The Bruce Ridge unit of Canberra nature park has had a proliferation of trails come through. There are issues there with safety for both the mountain bike riders themselves and other users. The level of usage that was going through was the concerning matter for our parks managers and the proliferation of trails that were slowly spreading across that reserve.

MS PORTER: These people were not necessarily using a defined trail that is there for mountain biking, for instance, but were going off into other trails.

Mr Griffiths: Or actually creating trails—noting a nice slope that you could go down. You only need one person to go down and you start finding other people may follow. If you look at any of our reserves, people often like to take the shortest route. Have a look at Mount Taylor where there was significant work done on putting a zigzag trail up that slope that faces Woden. That was to reduce the erosion from a direct route that went up. That direct route is still there. People want to go up the straight way; they want to test themselves. Unfortunately, that has significant erosion effects. It is quite a visible trail, certainly for the Woden area. You can see it quite clearly on Mount Taylor.

MS PORTER: How do you think we can manage this? It is not coming through an organisation; it is just people taking advantage of the environment and going out there and doing something that they enjoy doing. As a consequence, as you say, there is some degradation of the particular area. How do you see that being managed?

Mr Griffiths: That particular instance has been managed through working with the peak organisation for off-road mountain bikes. The parks and conservation service has

worked with that organisation to put in codes of practice for its members and also to develop relationships with the users within that area so that there is an overall community responsibility for that area. There is pressure from the current users to work within the boundaries that are agreed.

MS PORTER: Do you think that encouraging organised opportunities through ecotourism or eco-recreation—whatever way you want to describe it—can better educate people on the values of the particular asset that we have here in the ACT and how it should be conserved? Therefore, they would then use it more appropriately because it appears to me that ecotourism and eco-recreation could increase people's awareness of their environment.

Mr Griffiths: Certainly the educational aspect of ecotourism is something that our organisation supports. We actually run walks ourselves to get people out into the bush, to understand the benefits of it, the beauty of it and why it needs to be conserved, especially in the ACT, where it is a major contributor to our water supply and to the health of our citizens and tourists.

Large-scale events can have detrimental effects, which is why we have been talking about the need for an outdoor recreation strategy, so that we can see where specific types of events can be held, not necessarily within conservation reserves but across the ACT. There is numerous public land and even private land where events of various natures can be held. Those areas outside the conservation reserves may provide just as good opportunities for events as those being held within the conservation reserves. This would allow the reserves to be there for what they are legislatively put in place for—the conservation of nature.

As I said recently, we have had a study about the impact of orienteering. That was positive in some ways in that where the event was held, most of it has regenerated quite well, but it was, interestingly, a single event. It is a one-off study and the event has been very lucky in that it happened during a dry period, so that the ground was relatively hard, but then it was followed by quite significant rains which induced significant growth. If you go there, the kangaroo grass is as tall as my waist. It is quite amazing. It would be interesting if the study that we co-sponsored had occurred with a drought following on after the event, just to see what that was like.

So we really need more information about how these events impact on the environment. That is why we see the need for, again, that outdoor recreation strategy—trying to draw in the information and saying, "Where are our knowledge gaps and, if there are significant impacts within our reserves from certain events, how do we best cater for that?" The community is entitled to hold events; it is just about where they get held.

THE CHAIR: I want to go to the principles for ACT ecotourism in conservation reserves. On page 2 of your submission you talk about the principles that would need to underpin an ecotourism strategy. Has any of this work been done, to your knowledge? Under dot point 2, for instance, you talk about undertaking an experience audit of the park system.

Mr Griffiths: I will pass over to Clive on this. My knowledge is that, no, it has not

been done in a comprehensive way. Can I draw on your wider knowledge, Clive?

THE CHAIR: You also make reference to the nature-based tourism strategy that was published in 2000. With respect to any of the work you mention regarding the principles that will need to be incorporated, was that part of that 2000 strategy?

Mr Griffiths: Some of it was but the problem is that it actually has not really eventuated.

THE CHAIR: Yes, other than Tidbinbilla.

Mr Griffiths: Tidbinbilla has been good in that that was part of that strategy and that is a great opportunity for people to go out and look at things, and certain things have developed there. But there have been other areas within Tidbinbilla where proposals have been put forward and they have not actually worked.

Mr Hurlstone: As far as I am aware, the only work that has taken place was in relation to Tidbinbilla nature reserve. There are occasional counts of what people are doing on a particular day—walking a dog, riding a bicycle, having an exercise walk. There is not any research program, any collection of data, as to what people expect from that nature reserve or whether they think there should be more facilities or that some activities should be more proscribed or whether they should be allowed to do a range of other things. Some nature reserves allow dog walking; others do not. There has probably been a bit of work done on that but not on very many other things. So we are looking to get a better feel for what people want and how this affects their overall experience of the park system, whether they think that they are getting all the enjoyment they expected from it or whether there are some shortcomings. The tracks that they expected to be able to walk their children along may be too rocky or have too many sharp rocks. If they are a bicycle rider, the fire trail may have had too many large rocks on it, so they thought about making their own tracks. Those are the sorts of things on which we would like to see some collection of satisfaction or experience information, which would be very useful to the park managers and it would also be of interest to us in our promoting of activities within the park system.

Mr Griffiths: I suppose that is one of the key things that we have concerns about. With ecotourism we often hear very grand claims about the impact it will have on the ACT, the number of tourists that it will bring in and how that will help our economy, how it will not affect various bits and pieces, amenities or people or the conservation values of areas. We are very keen to see some way of quantifying what are the actual impacts of ecotourism. It is not a big sector within the ACT. I am sure people look at it as a growth area. But it does not seem to have been able to grow, so there must be reasons for that, despite the claims that we hear from various tourism organisations that say they can really make a big difference to the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Are you aware of any data gathering that might have been done in New South Wales around these particular questions? Are there any methodologies out there that we can have a look at?

Mr Griffiths: I would certainly refer you to the National Parks Association of New South Wales. That organisation has done a lot of work in analysing various proposals

that have happened within that jurisdiction. Certainly New South Wales has put forward a number of proposals, such as the lighthouse to lighthouse walk down in Ben Boyd national park. Various proposals have been looked at by that organisation, our sister organisation, and I am sure they have at least a source of knowledge about whether data is available for analysis.

MR SESELJA: The 2000 strategy you referred to: you said that not all of it has been implemented. Are you able to expand a little bit on what aspects of that strategy you think should have been implemented and have not been?

Mr Griffiths: Again, it would come back to that data collection. How do we justify various things that are being put forward to us? There are numerous enterprises in the past that have been put forward. Let me give you an example. Within Tidbinbilla there was a proposal to have luxury tours—"inside knowledge to Tidbinbilla"—put forward by an organisation. They would get exclusive use of Tidbinbilla and access after hours. It was not able to attract participants. There was something wrong with their marketing there. They did not do their marketing research.

It comes down to, certainly within the ACT, a strategy talking about, "Here's a number of ideas that we can put forward," but underneath that there needs to be that research. You have to say, "If we're going to put forward a strategy or a proposal, how do we assess it so that we know exactly what the outcomes are going to be and that the marketing is not just spin but actually substantiated through a quite rigorous scientific basis for marketing research?"

MR SESELJA: You talk in your submission about investing in maintaining and improving existing good quality, low impact park facilities. Let us take walking in Namadgi as one of those. Certainly, my experience is that many of the trails are very much underdone in terms of information and a number of other things. I am interested in your thoughts on the state of some of our trails in Namadgi and maybe where there are opportunities for improvement of those trails.

Mr Griffiths: I think you have probably hit the nail on the head there. There is quite significant work required in relation to track maintenance. There is only a limited budget in the ACT, as you are very well aware. The money within the parks service has to be spread very thinly. Sometimes that means that track maintenance does not occur. The information associated with some trails just is not there.

I can think of Nursery Swamp. When you get to the top of Nursery Swamp—I have raised this a couple of times with the parks service—you cannot read the information sign at the top. It has weathered, it is so old. It is totally illegible. That is a great spot for people to get to. I will not say it is an easy walk but it is a walk that families are capable of doing and it gets them to a unique spot within the ACT. We have lost out there. People get there and say, "What are we looking at?" There are spots like that that need work.

We need to be well aware of public safety when people are going out on some of these tracks. People should be aware of what they are going into before they get there. That is certainly an area of signage that we probably do not have within the ACT—just to give people an indication that maybe this is not a walk for the elderly or the

very frail. There are opportunities there and certainly within Namadgi there is a lot of work that happens from the community. In my organisation, Gudgenby bush regeneration works within that area to do volunteer work within the park. That only supplements the work that is being done and needs to be done by the parks service.

MR SESELJA: An example of that is the Namadgi visitors centre. One of the walks straight from there is the front of Mount Tennent. In fact, I was up there last Friday. I think you would probably classify as relatively dangerous at the moment aspects of that walk on the way down. I think that is an example, particularly given its proximity to the visitors centre. It is a bit of a showcase and people are encouraged to go from there. Likewise, on the back side of Mount Tennent there is a hut up there but you would not know it from any of the signage. There are a number of areas there where basic information seems lacking. That is obviously an area that your organisation would like to see upgraded, just the signage. When you talk about the information flow, you are also talking about the websites and being able to get better information. Do you have any comment on the parks website in terms of information on trails and the like?

Mr Griffiths: I must admit I have sometimes found it difficult to find information within that website. That is a common thing with many websites, though. I suppose we are quite fortunate with our website. We have a dedicated volunteer who keeps it up to date and provides walk programs et cetera that are available and relevant.

Mr Hurlstone: I have recently looked at the Namadgi national park website and the guides to the different trails. Those guides are very useful. They provide basic information. You can print them off or you can pick up a hard copy at the Namadgi visitors centre or at some of the track heads. Perhaps there need to be some links from those guides to the different tracks to other information—other maps or more information on current walking conditions—although I think that, overall, the website has a section on updates or something like that where you can go.

Of course, the ACT has had a lot of rain in the past 18 months, so some of the tracks have been eroded. I have been up Mount Tennent recently as well. The track is pretty rocky. I would say that is because a lot of the fill material from between the rocks has been eroded out with that very heavy rain. As you probably noticed, going up Mount Tennent there is a massive scouring out of a gully on the east side, which is a natural process. That is what happens when you have heavy rain with that type of landform and rainfall. We have to make sure that the paths are safe.

I am sure that eventually something will be done, but there is a big overload at the moment. Many of the fire trails have been badly damaged by the rain as well. Some of them were damaged after being refurbished only a month before. This is one of the dilemmas of looking after a natural environment. The environment is going to assert itself from time to time.

THE CHAIR: I suppose what you are saying is that there is now a bit of a backlog because heavy rain has caused further damage. Are you concerned about whether there is enough resourcing in that area to keep up and that we might fall even further behind if there is already a backlog?

Mr Griffiths: I think there is significant pressure on the parks service to maintain the services that we need within the ACT, remembering also that the ACT has a growing population and you do have more and more people there who want to access the parks surrounding them, certainly within the suburbs and also within Namadgi. I understand that the bill for the track refurbishments from the recent rains is quite significant and it has to be found within the budget. Things have to stretch; therefore the level of quality must go down, because you can only push things so far.

We have argued for many years that the budget for the environment has always been understated and that we do not recognise the benefits that the environment does provide not only for our water supply but also for the health of our population. There are significant benefits there. If we lost, let us say, Canberra nature park, people would lose that sense of serenity that some people have, the ability to go out and exercise within those areas. We would see a move forward to costs within our health system as well.

MR SESELJA: I have one side item which I am not sure you will know the answer to. We often pride ourselves on the fact that with Canberra nature park all the hills, ridges and the like are publicly accessible. I am not sure whether there are any other parts of Canberra that are like this, but at the back of Banks the ridge there appears now to be in private ownership. The entire hill has big "keep out" signs. I am not familiar with whether or not there are any other parts of Canberra where that is the case but I found that to be a little bit odd.

Mr Griffiths: I think that is because it is probably next to Rob Roy nature reserve. It is quite popular for some people to go up there. Unfortunately there is a leasehold that adjoins that. My recollection, and it has been a little while, is that it was quite easy to find yourself on the non-reserve as opposed to the reserve. Obviously the leaseholder has decided to make it clear where the demarcation is.

MS PORTER: You talked about the fact that the population is growing here. Obviously more people are being born here, people are moving here, relatives are coming to live closer. How can we let people know about them, without increasing the usage of the parks to the point where people are damaging the parks through unregulated usage, which we were talking about before with regard to the mountain biking? How can we let people know about this wonderful asset? I think a lot of people who come to live here, and even people who have lived here for years, have never, ever realised that they are living right in the middle of a national park. They are quite unaware of their surroundings and environment. How can we maintain that balance while letting people know that it is there?

Mr Griffiths: There have been a couple of initiatives over the last few years, mainly through a movement called Bush on the Boundary, the BOB projects. They have been working with the newer suburbs. Certainly up in Gungahlin there is a Bush on the Boundary which has been very successful just in engaging the residents of the new suburbs, putting out information. As people turn up, there is information there for them. We are very privileged in the ACT. We are one of the few cities where the environment is right next-door to us. The nature reserves are right there amongst our suburbs.

These projects, driven by the Conservation Council ACT Region, have been able to

get information out to the residents of these newer suburbs and have various events, walks et cetera, that allow the information to go out to those newer residential areas. There are plans to expand that in Belconnen. There is also a plan for Molonglo. Again, it will need funding. I know the Conservation Council do not have a lot of funds, and I know they do not have a project manager who would be able to take that up, simply because they literally do not have the funds to cover that at this stage. I am sure they are looking at ways of getting there.

There are publications which have been funded by the ACT government that deal with Gungahlin's treasures, Belconnen's treasures; there is another one coming out on Tuggeranong's treasures. They identify the heritage and natural treasures that are available to residents within certain areas. They are beautiful books; they are lovely little books to pick up, put in your hand and say, "Look at that; I hadn't realised exactly what that was." They are a number of simple ways of engaging with the community, especially early on in these new suburbs. People are actually taking responsibility; they are getting ownership of the reserves with which they are living side by side.

THE CHAIR: Earlier this afternoon we spoke with Ms Penelope Figgis. She said in her evidence that she thought Canberra had some great opportunities. One of those opportunities was around long-range walking. She mentioned you could be looking at where a walk would go and then, if it was in a park, you could look at having some accommodation along the way—not in the park but on the boundary, just outside the park. I note that your submission goes to the question of accommodation in parks and that you are not supportive of that. But she was saying that there could be a boundary walk or whatever. Do you know of anywhere that that sort of thing could be rolled out in the ACT or where there is a trail—

Mr Griffiths: There is a proposal that is underway at the moment, the Centenary Trail, which would be a significant walk within the ACT. Once you link it all up, it would have to be at least a three-day walk. Because of the way it is organised, it allows people to access accommodation outside the park. It allows the local businesses to then pick up that increased usage, where people need accommodation. We have always said that it actually benefits the community as a whole for the accommodation to be outside the reserves because it provides benefits to the existing community, which is why we are so strongly in favour of it. So that is a key one. We already have a major walk, which Mr Seselja touched on—the start of the alpine trail, which goes from Namadgi through to New South Wales and down into Victoria. It is an iconic trail and if you go to the visitors centre there are usually one or two people finishing it or just starting it, somewhere along there, each day.

MR SESELJA: I think we have touched on most of the issues you wanted to touch on. I do not know whether there is anything else you have not got out. It has certainly been very useful for me.

Mr Griffiths: I will touch on our vision for a national park because we do actually see that as an opportunity for the ACT. Our vision is based on the need to recognise that the ACT is a holder of key woodland ecosystems in Australia and that we are very lucky to have these. The examples that we have are already better than you would find in New South Wales—so the quality of these examples is there. There is an opportunity over time, because some of the land that we foresee needs to be within this reserve, this new national park, is actually leasehold, so it is not going to happen

instantly.

We see that there is a vision where we can achieve connectivity between the low and grassy woodlands and significant areas within the ACT. But that then offers up an opportunity to link into the Mulligans Flat sanctuary. We recognise that as a key asset for Australia as well. There is the research they are doing there, but let us put it into context. The ACT has this amazing ecosystem of which we are custodians for Australia. It would be a fantastic spot for a visitors centre. Think about the location. It is in the northern part of the ACT. The ACT's national parks visitors centre is right down the south. Here it would be very close to one of the major access points for the ACT and would raise the standard and the understanding of the community of how precious this natural reserve is for both the ACT and Australia.

THE CHAIR: You raise it in your submission and you talk about Mulligans Flat. Could you just outline what areas—

Mr Griffiths: Our vision is basically an arch that flows right across the top of the ACT. It would be existing reserves; it could actually be established from existing reserves initially. But there are significant areas of woodlands that still need to be reserved in the Gungahlin rim. It would cover the Gungahlin rim, starting from near Hall and going right across the top of the ACT, flowing down through to Mount Majura and Black Mountain. Then there would be a southern section, a slightly lower section, still part of the northern national park, where you could take in the fantastic woodlands of Mount Mugga, Red Hill, Callum Brae, Wanniassa Hills et cetera. These sorts of things would connect. There is potential there to really raise the ACT's and Australia's awareness of how important these grassy woodlands are.

THE CHAIR: Are you also aware of a proposal that has been put forward by a newly formed group around the Ginninderra gorge?

Mr Griffiths: Yes, I am very well aware of that. One of our committee members is a committee member on that. We talk regularly with them. Certainly, we support their proposal. We think the creation of a national park there would enhance the ACT's reserve system because it would link into the Murrumbidgee River corridor and provide greater access there and maybe highlight the atrocious weed state of that northern part of the Murrumbidgee River corridor.

THE CHAIR: As there are no further questions, thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon. We will be sending a transcript of the evidence. If there are any errors that you feel need correcting, please let our secretary know. Once again, I would like to thank you for your time in making the submission and appearing before us today.

Mr Griffiths: We would just like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you.

Mr Hurlstone: Yes, thank you for the opportunity.

The committee adjourned at 4.42 pm.