

Bram Collins

Managing Director, Undara Experience

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www.undara.com.au

Submission: Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015

I write to lodge a formal submission to the Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015, which has been referred to the Agriculture and Environment Committee for consideration. I am the Managing Director of Undara Experience - a multi-faceted, award-winning tour experience in a unique outback setting of North Queensland.

Undara is steeped in Queensland's history, dating back to 1862, where my family first grazed cattle in this region as the earliest white settlers.

Our family firmly believed that the best way to protect these dramatic, ancient formations for future generations lay in developing a sustainable visitor experience, managed to lessen the environmental impact but highlight the unique ecology and geology of the lava tube system.

In developing Undara Experience, our family has always worked closely with the Savannah Guides organization, regional and state government bodies and proposed a national park be gazetted and tours to the lava tubes be accessed from a lodge facility managed by the family.

We have held a special business lease on the edge of the Undara Volcanic National Park since 1992, with all tours conducted by highly-trained Savannah Guides.

It is with this experience and knowledge gained through generations, that I believe I am well-placed to provide constructive feedback and express my disapproval on the contents of this Bill, which will be detrimental to the protection of national parks.

I appreciate the opportunity to respond and have listed my views in response to each of the dot-points listed in the explanatory notes of the Bill's Inquiry Overview below **(in bold)**:

- *(the bill) reinstates 'the conservation of nature' as the sole object of the Nature Conservation Act 1992 so that the preservation of the natural condition of national parks will take precedence over other objectives*

- 1) I strongly believe that reverting back to the past legislation which didn't achieve "best practise" environmental outcomes is more for political benefit rather than what is best for the environment. I strongly support 'the conservation of nature' as the sole objective but to achieve that, fundamental changes to the way in which we perceive and engage with our natural landscape need to be made first. There is no evidence to suggest that this ideology will ensure better environmental outcomes, as it did not deliver the desired results for conservation management when previously in place. If legislation is going to be changed it should be constantly improved upon to achieve world's best practise.**
- 2) When evaluating the success of state-operated National Parks, there were no credible conservation and environmental outcomes across a suite of measurable targets. In particular, these failures can be highlighted by the ongoing rates of species extinctions. There is currently no credible evidence to support that the rates of species loss is any lower within state-operated National Park areas in comparison to that of privately-managed lands. I personally have observed the progressive decline of world class features within government-controlled national parks, such as the World Heritage-listed Riversleigh fossil sites, where any visitor can (and has) easily pillaged from one of**

the most significant fossil deposits in the world. This has happened because of a lack of resources available to national parks to station a ranger there to ensure the sites protection. All visitation to our national parks creates a financial impost on the public purse which they currently cannot afford which feeds the ideology to “lock up” our natural areas in the hope that it reduces the parks operating costs. The visitor management to areas of environmental significance within our national parks should be the responsibility of the locally based, accredited tourism operators. By relieving the State-operated National Parks service of the burden of visitor management they can then focus their limited resources on achieving their environmental management objectives. Accredited private operators are best suited to the visitor management responsibilities because of the flow-on economic benefits to the local communities situated near the national park.

- 3) The time is well and truly past to think that it is acceptable to have sacrificial sites which allow free and unguided access to sites of environmental significance, like Riversleigh, within our national park estates. If our vision truly is for nature conservation, then we need to implement a ‘user-pay’ system for access to our national parks. Currently, Queensland is the only state in Australia without a ‘user-pay’ system, and I believe this is the only way we can sustainably reach desired conservation objectives. A ‘user-pay’ system would create a significant economic benefit for the parks service whilst also providing the economic benefits to our struggling rural economies through local involvement in visitor management. The tourism dollar has the greatest multiplier effect when it comes to injecting funds into a local economy. This system would increase consolidated revenue for the State Government, but should be predicated on the condition that the funds raised are retained and/or redistributed back into the regions from which they were generated. Funding applications to access further funding could also be submitted for specific projects that improve or achieve the “triple bottom line” objectives of the park.
 - 4) I understand and support the need to generate revenue, where possible, from and for our national parks, but I believe this could be best achieved in partnership with accredited local tourism operators who have the necessary accreditations to meet specific criteria such as: an ongoing engagement with the traditional owners of the land; tourism industry accreditation from organizations such as Savannah Guides to demonstrate a commitment as responsible operators to personal and professional development. This improvement in standards will enrich the tourism experience of visitors who will further promote the regions; bringing economic benefit to local economies through increased spending by travellers, local jobs generation all of which make significant contributions to the local economy. This strategy would boost much-needed local community involvement in the operations of national park, giving a sense of ownership and responsibility. We have an incredible opportunity to develop a ‘best practice’ model in Queensland by involving our local communities in our national parks, which achieves positive outcomes for conservation and education whilst ensuring much needed spending is directed into the most critical areas.
- *removes redundant provisions that allowed the chief executive to grant stock grazing permits for emergency drought relief on six prescribed national parks up until the end of 2013*
- 1) There is no evidence to suggest that a ‘blanket ban’ on hard-footed animals in our national parks will result in better conservation outcomes. In a large number of

cases with national parks west of the Great Dividing Range in Queensland, before these areas were declared national parks, they were cattle stations and used for grazing. The conservation values created that ultimately led to the land area being valued highly enough for it to be considered worthy of inclusion in the national park estate originally was created by the way in which it was managed previously. If non-invasive sustainable stocking rates were determined, cattle could be used as a management tool on a rotational basis to help reduce bushfire fuel loads. Surely this would help to achieve many of the desired conservation outcomes in national parks.

- *reinstates the former national park (scientific), conservation park and resources reserve classes of protected area, and their associated management principles*

1) Scientific research and properly resourced land management is essential for areas of high conservation value but again I stress that the former national park associated management principals did not deliver world's best practise outcomes so going back is a step in the wrong direction. We need to be working to improve on all of the past systems by engaging new thinking! However, we have a great opportunity to educate the travelling public about the importance of conservation and sustainability. Again this is best done by utilizing the partnership with the accredited tour operators. Access to the sites of greatest conservation value within our national parks should not be 'open-slather' to the public, instead accessed only by the operators with the highest accreditation. If operators choose not to engage in accreditation, their access permits reflect this. Those who strive to achieve the highest standards, get access to the best sites. Without reward for effort accreditation has no value. Without a commercial advantage, operators will not support accreditation. This has been adopted by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority. They have granted longer permit tenures to operators who achieve Advanced Accreditation under the national ecotourism accreditation scheme. The benefits of accreditation will help the state-operated National Parks service achieve conservation outcomes whilst providing a commercial advantage for tourism operators who gain the necessary accreditation.

- *excludes leases used for agriculture, grazing or pastoral purposes on protected areas from the rolling term lease provisions under the Land Act 1994. This change will allow the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service to consider the appropriateness of the use when leases expire*

1. Most rural stakeholders have been comfortable with the 'rolling leases' and we object to the content of the Bill which intends to exclude these leases for agricultural, grazing and pastoral use. We should give special consideration to those leases who initiate the incorporation of best management practise plans (BMP) to improve environmental outcomes on their leases. BMP is increasingly being used in eastern catchments for Barrier Reef sustainability and is recommended and supported by the responsible primary producer organisations and widely accepted by Government. Like valuing accreditation for tourism operators, good stewardship by lessees needs recognition and needs to create a commercial advantage. If land owners are rewarded for doing the right thing it will get broad support across the industry.

- *amends the Nature Conservation Act 1992 to remove an exemption that allows management plans for protected areas to be amended without public consultation, if the amendments relate to a change in State government policy*

1) It is imperative that key stakeholders and the local communities are involved in the processes and decision-making affecting our national parks without restrictive

government intervention. Prior to the declaration of the Undara Volcanic National Park, an advisory group was formed to develop a draft conservation management plan. Stakeholders from all the effected interest groups were given a seat on this committee. They included effected landholders who were losing land to form the national park, the traditional owners, the local shire, the local fire warden, the consulting geologist, Savannah Guides to name a few. An independent consultant was engaged to develop a draft plan using all of the stakeholders as a sounding board for their interest group. All of the key stakeholders worked well together and the process was very positive but the only downfall was that when the draft was finished only National Parks were given a copy to review. By the time the rest of the stakeholders got a copy, National Parks had made wholesale changes to the original plan, ignoring allot of the stakeholder feedback and prioritizing the preservation of the bureaucracy over ensuring what was best for the ongoing wellbeing of the new national park.

- 2) Locally developed park management plans will have far better all-round outcomes as opposed to trying to fit into a broad state wide plan that doesn't have the flexibility to address the wide variations in the natural environments. These plans need to focus on the specific needs of the natural conditions of the native area but also how the local community engages with it. There are many local stakeholders who can add great value to this process initially and in an ongoing capacity like the local Natural Resource Management Groups, Traditional Owners etc. They can take into account and develop specific management practises that apply locally. It is imperative that Parks and Wildlife are included as a stakeholder in this process! This local involvement with have a positive triple bottom line effect.

- *amends the Aboriginal Land Act 1991 to streamline the process to convert regional parks on Cape York Peninsula to jointly managed national park (Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal land), otherwise known as national park (CYPAL), and*
- *amends the Environmental Protection Act 1994 to defer the sunset clause for the expiry of the existing eligibility criteria for mining activities.*
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- 1) Here we are talking about jointly managed parks on Cape York Peninsula with Aboriginal people why not widen our thinking and look to develop this thinking with a broader community input. This will only serve to further enhance and support the sole objective of 'conservation of nature'. Whilst doing that it also improves the standards in the tourism industry by supporting accreditation which creates an economic benefit to regional Queensland.

Thank you for your consideration of my submission.

Bram Collins
Managing Director, Undara Experience
Savannah Guide