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19 December 2012

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Submission Re: Nature Conservation and other Legislation Amendment Bill (Qld)

Part 4 Amendment of *Nature Conservation Act 1992*: Authorisation of private tourism facilities on National Park land

Environmental Issues

Among the most biologically rich countries in the world, Australia is home to roughly 10% of all species known to man. CSIRO has estimated the value of Australia's ecosystems, its air, water, forests, flora and fauna at more than \$1,300 billion per year (Parks Australia 2012). Conversely, over the last 200 years, Australia has suffered the largest documented decline in biodiversity of any continent. Since European settlement, more than 50 species of Australian animals and over 60 species of Australian plants are known to have become extinct (Parks Australia 2012).

Wilderness areas provide important opportunities for maintaining ecosystem integrity, and the nation's network of protected areas is the best available means to ensure the recovery and conservation of our native ecosystems (Mackay *et al.* 1998).

Currently, all National Parks are accessible to the public on an equal basis.

For 50 years, the State's National Parks have been managed for the primary purpose of nature conservation. This purpose is enshrined in legislation as the cardinal principle, which seeks to provide, to the greatest possible extent, for the permanent preservation of the area's natural condition and the protection of the area's cultural resources and values. While the proposed amendments attempt to incorporate this principle in the protective provisions of s 35(1)(c)¹ – the very notion of development on National Park land is inherently incompatible with a primary conservation purpose.

The construction of tourism facilities within National Parks will, by definition, decrease the total area of National Parks in the State and inevitably degrade the areas' natural condition and biodiversity values. The buildings themselves will require clearing of vegetation and changes to water courses, generate pollution and act as a haven for floral and faunal pest species (Buckley 2009). In addition to these direct environmental impacts, facilities built in remote areas of National Parks will require access routes, which produce a wide range of severe secondary environmental impacts; access roads act as corridors for weeds, feral animals, plant and animal disease, as well as a variety of illegal Park uses (examples include illegal motor vehicle access, dumping and even illicit drug cultivation) (Buckley 2009).

It is foreseeable that owners of private accommodation in National Parks will seek permission for associated tourism activities, such as hiking, horse-riding and mountain-biking or even high-impact motor-vehicle tours (e.g. quad bikes) in order to increase profitability. Even low impact activities (let alone such as those above) have well-documented environmental impacts, including trail compaction and widening, vegetation damage, soil erosion, changes in species composition, the creation of copious informal trails and the spread of weeds and pathogens (Pickering *et al.* 2010). Best practice management of these impacts usually involves concentration of tourism activities to a single area of the Park (Turton 2005). Allowing tourism developments to be situated throughout National Parks rather than near a single gateway will increase the area of Park exposed to tourism and exacerbate the environmental degradation caused by tourism activities. Higher impact activities involving motorised vehicles would bring an unacceptable level of degradation and should be kept outside of natural areas.

Economic Issues

There is much evidence to suggest that approval of permanent private facilities inside National Parks would not achieve the Bill's stated intention of boosting tourism in Queensland. Firstly, the scale of such facilities would be comparatively small, limiting the number of additional tourists visiting the State. Secondly, facilities within National Parks would compete with established gateway accommodation, reducing their customer volumes and prices. Thirdly, the 'urbanisation' of the area has potential to create user-conflicts by destroying the values that attract people in the first place – peace, isolation, naturalness.

Further, Australian research suggests that few remote tourism enterprises are profitable unless they are within two hour's drive from a capital city or other tourism gateway (Buckley 2009). Visitation levels to more remote Parks are unlikely to support commercial accommodation. Less than 1% of the 20,000 National Parks worldwide hold significant tourism infrastructure, and private facilities has been widely experienced as poor revenue raisers for Park agencies (Park Watch 2012 and Buckley 2009).

Conclusion

While recognising the economic significance of Queensland's National Parks as attractions for the tourism industry, NQCC suggests that the proposed amendments would fail to achieve the increased tourism objective, while seriously degrading the environmental values of Queensland's most precious natural areas.

There have been cases the world over where, in a bid to increase the 'enjoyment' of a natural resource, the resource itself has been destroyed or irretrievably diminished.¹¹ Unfortunately, with a laissez-faire attitude to environmental resilience and cumulative impacts, the tipping point is only identified after it has long passed.

Part 3 Amendment of *Forestry Act 1959*: Removal of area and time limits on State Forest occupation permits

The general objective of the proposed amendments is to streamline exploitation of State Forests for gas extraction and mining. These Forests are commonly the only areas of native vegetation remaining in areas such as the Brigalow Belt bioregion (ARCS 2004). It is imperative that any permit or lease processes involving State Forests considers the biodiversity values of the areas and their role as potential future protected areas. There is no such consideration in the amendments proposed.

I commend this submission to you.



Wendy Tubman
Coordinator

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¹ Under this provision, the Chief Executive must be satisfied that the use under the authority is in the public interest, ecologically sustainable and will provide, to the greatest possible extent, for the preservation of the land's natural condition and the protection of the land's cultural resources and values.

¹¹ Examples include Whale Shark populations, Florida Keys, Venice, Bali and Yosemite's half-dome.