



Speech by

JOHN KINGSTON

MEMBER FOR MARYBOROUGH

Hansard 1 August 2001

NATIONAL PARKS

Dr KINGSTON (Maryborough—Ind) (6.08 p.m.): I move—

That this House calls on the government to honour the commitment of the Bicentennial National Trail and the promise made by the previous Environment Minister in relation to the RFA that as a result of government policy, there would be no net loss of access to the national park by recreational users.

In 1972 R. M. Williams gained widespread support for the idea that the Australian national horse trail should be formalised as a Bicentennial National Trail to, first, commemorate the spirit and courage of the pioneers who, with horses and bullocks, opened up this country; and, second, establish an Australian icon and identify a scenic and historic route which could be traversed by tourists utilising various modes of transport.

Mr Williams dispatched Dan Seymour to ride northwards along stock routes and historic trails, gathering local information as he went. Subsequently, the trail was marked and mapped by Mike Allen and Brian Taylor. It runs from Cooktown in the north to Healesville in Victoria. They found that the trail they formalised closely followed the actual trails used by our pioneers and by Seymour.

On 18 August 1998, Queensland National Parks and Wildlife published a relevant policy statement and released it through the EPA. In the Protected Area Policy—Horseriding on Protected Areas—it stated—

A government commitment has been given to the maintenance of access for people, including horseriders, along the bicentennial national trail, which runs from the border to Cooktown and crosses protected areas in several instances.

In the explanation, this document states that horse riding is contrary to the scientific management principles of a national park, but it does not scientifically substantiate this statement. The document then goes on to say that horses may be permitted on grazing leases over national parks. I am fascinated to know how the undefined danger horses pose to the environment can vary between a national park and a national park subject to a grazing lease.

At the same meeting the Australian Trail Horse Riders Association was formed with the aim of promoting the national horse trail and other trails for recreational use. It is vitally concerned that access to trails is maintained for a variety of recreational purposes.

The member for Everton, whilst he occupied the Environment portfolio, promised that he would create a 'forest park tenure' and that there would be 'no net loss to recreation'. I repeat: no net loss to recreation. The honourable minister has not lived up to his tenure promise; and by the rapidly increasing pile of faxes arriving in my office, I can assure the House that the number of people who do not trust this government to honour his access promise is growing exponentially.

The Environmental Access for Recreation Federation Inc. and the Queensland Outdoor Recreation Federation were formed because of the intransigence of this government in the face of reasoned, responsible requests. These bodies represent trail riders, endurance riders, pony clubs, the Queensland volunteer mounted search organisation, mountain bicycle riders, four-wheel-drive clubs, trail motorbike riders, campers and lapidary clubs—quite a reasonable section of the community.

The minister should note carefully that these people are doing their homework very carefully. To illustrate, the Australian Trail Horse Riders Association has what I would call a code of ethics—the 13 golden rules for the environmentally aware horse rider, as it calls them. The Caboolture Trail Horse Club Inc. wrote to the minister on 14 June this year presenting him with evidence of long-used trails not causing environmental damage. The Illawarra Horse Owners Association presented opinions from Professor David Hodgson from the University of Sydney which stated—

With reference to contamination of local water sources, few, if any, environmental pathogens are excreted in horse faeces. No giardia from horses have been shown to be transmissible to humans.

Therefore he concluded—

Horses pose little, if any threat—certainly less risk than many of the other domestic and wild animal species.

He continued—

There is little difference between the potential for spread of noxious weeds in horse faeces than that posed by bird and wildlife species already inhabiting national parks.

The Sunshine Coast Area Trail and Endurance Riders Inc. and the Queensland Endurance Riders Association have distributed an article titled 'The Impact of Horse Riding in Nature Reserves' taken from the journal titled *Tracks*. James Elsbury has addressed the question of environmental damage caused by ridden horses. Is it fact or is it fiction? Are the accusations so obviously impacting on the minister's policy advisers based on good science?

The Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University was consulted. Dr Sara Beavis delivered her 67-page very reassuring report—reassuring for horse riders, that is—on 15 March 2000. Having read that report, I am amazed at what I am hearing from responsible horse riders.

Dr Freudemberger of the CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology has established that horses should not be condemned because they are hard-footed animals, and humans and our native marsupials are soft-footed animals. The important issue is one of stocking rate. He concluded that given that recreational riders are relatively few in number, their impact in terms of equivalent stocking rate is probably negligible. But he concluded also that excluding rabbits, wallabies and wombats was the most significant single variable influencing the number of weeds present in national parks.

Through you, Mr Speaker, I strongly recommend that the minister should read these reports before his officers ban trail riders from places such as Kroombit Tops, as is being threatened at the moment, because these moves would embarrass him further.

National parks and the Department of Environment are currently annoying a lot of thinking people and rapidly losing credibility. They appear to make two basic assumptions which are insulting to many graziers and people who enjoy their recreation in the outdoors. Those assumptions are: firstly, only personnel within those two departments have any knowledge of sustainable natural resource use and environmental risk assessment; and, secondly, all citizens not within the holy confines of those departments are environmental vandals.

Mr Speaker, through you, I suggest to the minister that he and his advisers listen carefully to responsible and experienced people—not housed in comfortable offices in Brisbane—and in particular, in this instance, listen to the recreational horse riders who are well researched and support this motion.
