

EDITORIAL

A TNPA member walked the Overland Track in May this year. Among the few other walkers on the Track at the end of the booking season was a young couple from Belgium. Tasmania was the first leg of their overseas trip, but it was also top of their 'must visit' list – because of our State's famed wilderness areas and national parks. They were horrified to learn that our State government would like to 'open up' Tasmania's wilderness areas to more tourist facilities. They instructed the TNPA member to "Tell your government that we came here from Europe especially to experience these wild unspoiled places and that they must keep them that

way. Tell them that people come here from other countries so that they can get away from hotels, cable cars etc."

This was a reminder that we strive to preserve and protect these 'places we love', not just for ourselves, not just for future generations but also for the rest of the world. They are indeed world heritage.

The push by our current State government to allow tourism developers into our national parks and World Heritage Areas is one of the major issues facing the TNPA at this moment and highlights the crucial role played by the organization.

FROM THE PRESIDENT'S PEN:

Potential impacts on conservation reserves from seismic shifts in government policies

In my last President's Pen I wrote that we are living in "interesting times" as the future suddenly seems far less certain. This observation was based on the recent election of the Abbott Federal government and the likely change of the Tasmanian State government (which did indeed occur in March this year).

And so what has eventuated this year, and was my earlier observation warranted.

A portent of approaches by both the new Federal and State governments to conservation issues was noted in a speech the Prime Minister gave earlier this year to the Australian Forest Products Association. Mr Abbott said. "We have quite enough National Parks, we have quite enough locked up forests already. In fact, in an important respect, we have too much locked up forest." He went on to call timber workers "the ultimate conservationists."

What the Prime Minister does not seem to understand is that whilst occupying less than 8% of Australia, national parks are critical to conserving our unique biodiversity, are a major drawcard in the annual \$23 billion nature-based tourism industry, and contribute significantly to our health and well-being. Also, national parks are not locked up but have the most generous form of land tenure available, being publicly available to all. As Michelle Prior, President of the National Parks Australia Council said, "Australia's national parks are not only a national achievement, but a legacy for the future. The majority of Australia's citizens value and appreciate national parks. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister is out of touch with contemporary opinions and knowledge"

Sadly, a number of developments at the Federal level reflect the Prime Minister's adverse ideological approach to conservation issues. These include the attempt to have 74,000 ha of forests revoked from the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area

(TWWHA). These forests, which had only been added to the TWWHA the previous year, were part of the larger package of forests identified for conservation as an outcome of the historic Tasmanian Forests Agreement (TFA). The government's claim that the forests were degraded, and as such should be unlocked for the timber industry, were not supported by the evidence, which clearly demonstrated that over 90% was pristine old-growth forest. As the TNPA stated in its submission to the Senate Enquiry, also noting that there is a clear obligation under the TWWHA management plan to 'rehabilitate' areas where values have been diminished, supporting the government's proposal would have been akin to punching a small hole in the Mona Lisa and then claiming the whole picture has been destroyed. Obviously we would repair the picture, just as we can with the forests.

Fortunately, at its Doha meeting in late June the United Nations' World Heritage Committee unanimously rejected the Federal Government's application, with delegates from Portugal stating that "accepting this delisting would set an unacceptable precedent". This decision needs to be celebrated, as not only does it uphold the original decision for the area to be World Heritage listed and reaffirm the universal values of these forests, but it is a triumph of rational evidence-based decision making (i.e. common sense) over blatant ideology.

However, while we can celebrate this victory, the Federal Government has continued to steam ahead in implementing its election commitment for a so-called 'one-stop-shop' approach to environmental approvals for *Matters of National Environmental Significance*, which include impacts on areas such as the Great Barrier Reef, World Heritage Areas, and wetlands of global significance. As the Australian Network of Environmental Defenders' Offices (ANEDO) told a parliamentary inquiry, the handover of environmental approval powers could lower environmental standards by reducing assessment processes, public participation or judicial scrutiny and produce a confusing 'eight-stop-shop' of environmental protection.

Draft amending bills to the EPBC Act were introduced in the House of Representatives without notice on 14th May. Together with removing the 'water trigger', which gave the Federal

government power to scrutinise the cumulative impacts of coal and coal seam gas projects on water supplies, these amendments also propose a potential role for local governments in approving developments affecting *Matters of National Environmental Significance* (MNES). This development further heightens the likelihood of significant conflicts of interest, and the obvious and complete lack of competence on the part of local government to pass judgement on MNES issues. One only needs to ask whether the Franklin River would have been saved under such a process? Indeed, an ANEDO audit of threatened species and planning laws in all Australian jurisdictions in 2012 found that “no State or Territory biodiversity or planning laws currently meet the suite of Federal environmental standards necessary to effectively and efficiently protect biodiversity.” While the Senate Environment and Communications Committee Inquiry has released a report supporting these amendments, both the Labor Party and the Greens submitted dissenting reports.

Concern about the Federal government meeting appropriate environmental standards has also been reinforced by a recent Auditor-General’s report which has highlighted serious problems with the Environment Department’s enforcement of environment laws and slammed its ‘passive’ approach to ensuring developers comply with conditions to protect areas such as the Great Barrier Reef [*The Age*, 21 June]. This concern is reinforced by cuts announced in the Federal budget which will include further cuts to the Environment Department, including over 100 staff from the division responsible for compliance and enforcement.

With the election of the Hodgman Liberal government in Tasmania in March this year, there has also been a number of policy shifts which will affect national parks and the further conservation of the State’s forests.

The first of these changes is the legislation introduced to Parliament in May which will repeal the Tasmanian Forests Agreement Act 2013 and remove approximately 400,000 hectares of land from its current status under the TFA of ‘Future Reserve Land’ and place it under a new status, ‘Future Potential Production Forest’, with a moratorium on harvesting in this zone for a minimum period of six years. There will also be a requirement that in future the formal reservation of further Tasmanian forest would need a two-thirds majority of both Houses of Parliament. The right to protest is also to be stymied by the introduction of severe penalties. Claims that the TFA was based on politics and not science would seem to fly in the face of the report of the Independent Verification Group chaired by Professor West. Indeed, tearing up an agreement which was the outcome of three years of negotiations, was supported by the Tasmanian Forests Industry and ENGOs, with compromises being made by both sides, and was ultimately supported by the Tasmanian Parliament, would appear to be based purely on partisan political posturing of the worst kind.

The second major change is the Liberal Party’s policy entitled “Unlocking the potential of our parks” which states that the government will facilitate ‘sensible, sustainable development and improved infrastructure’ in our national parks and World Heritage

Areas. Specific policies included: 1) a \$2 million upgrade to the South Coast Track, 2) completion of stage 3 of the Three Capes Track, and 3) partnering with the private sector to unlock our parks, and facilitate further development.

The TNPA has long called for further funding to help upgrade the network of walking tracks in Tasmania, many of which are in poor condition (see *TNPA News* No. 8). We therefore offer support for an appropriate upgrading of the South Coast Track. However, we have also voiced our concern about the manner in which Three Capes Track is being developed (see Three Capes Update later in this issue) and so we will watch how this upgrade is facilitated with close interest.

In relation to the Three Capes Track the TNPA has consistently argued that the present concept and design is flawed and that there are alternatives which would bring greater economic and environmental benefits to the Tasman Peninsula (see <http://keepthecapeswild.org.au/>). However, repeated calls for this concept to be reviewed have been ignored. Given this lack of inclusive consultation, the TNPA remains deeply concerned with the third policy above which “will encourage development in our national parks by calling for expressions of interest from private investors and tourism operators.”

A call for Expressions of Interest (EOI) was made in *The Mercury* on Saturday 21st June. It was stated that proposals may range from activities at specific geographic locations to nature-based, resort-style accommodation, including walking tours, helicopter flights, mountain-bike riding, river cruises, new interpretative experiences or even luxury camping escapes. This call will remain open for five months. Echoing the Federal government’s call that “Australia is open for business” the accompanying guidelines state that the new process will demonstrate that “Tasmania is open for business.”

An assessment panel is to be formed to advise the Minister on which proposals will progress to Stage 2. Guidelines for the development of EOI state that a number of high-level principles are to apply and that any proposal that progresses to Stage Two will need to be assessed using the normal approvals pathways for developments on reserved land. While the TNPA supports this assessment process, we nevertheless have a number of concerns about other aspects of the Guidelines.

First, while the Guidelines state that proposals ‘should be compatible with the statutory management objectives’, EOI that are ‘not fully compatible with the current statutory and regulatory framework’ can still be lodged. Surely, this statement is contradictory. Second, the Guidelines also state that for ‘suitable proposals that meet the assessment criteria’, the Government may consider options to amend management plans if required. Again, if a proposal is compatible with the statutory management plan for a given national park then a change to the plan would not be necessary. This raises a serious concern as, in essence, this allows the Minister to decide – apparently at his discretion and not according to what is in the management plan - what is to be deemed suitable.

Unfortunately, we have seen such arbitrary rewriting of

management plans before. For example, in 2001, in order to allow a proposed development at Cockle Creek to proceed the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan had to be altered. This alteration zoned the previously unzoned development site as part of the Cockle Creek East Visitor Services Site. One of the three sentences that were changed was: "In the Southwest National Park development of infrastructure, including huts, is not allowed in view of the natural character of the area". This was replaced by "In the Southwest National Park development of infrastructure, including huts, is not allowed, except within Cockle Creek East Visitor Services Site." Fortunately this development did not proceed. There should be no arbitrary changes to regulatory frameworks and management plans, which have been developed over many years with public input, to appease a potential developer's wish!

Several recent announcements indicate that the new government is already adopting bad habits in the assessment of proposals which could potentially impact on the values protected within conservation reserves. The secretive nature in which the MONA art installation at Melaleuca was processed, and the recent announcement that Tasmanian Air Adventures has been granted a number of exclusive licences to land within the WHA (including a 12 month trial at Lake St Clair) and other national parks, indicate that little consideration is being given to community consultation. The maintenance of peace and quiet in the WHA has been identified as a significant management issue in national parks in several countries and, indeed, was a major issue in the formation of the TNPA just over a decade ago. The trial seaplane landings at Lake St Clair would also seem to ignore critical conservation issues, with lake shore erosion having been formally assessed and determined to be a critical issue in the 1990s, resulting in an agreement with Hydro Tasmania to maintain the lake levels 1m higher than had been the case.

The TNPA supports appropriate tourist-based opportunities in and around national parks and the regional benefits that will flow from such projects. However, we argue strongly that these same benefits can be achieved by placement of most such projects outside the boundaries of Tasmania's national parks. Indeed, the development of very successful tourist nodes at places such as Strahan, Coles Bay and Cradle Valley validates this argument. It is not possible to place infrastructure facilities such as 'resort-style accommodation', as mentioned in the government's call for EOIs, within a national park and World Heritage Area without degrading the very essence of the natural environment and the World Heritage conservation values for which the area was originally protected.

The TNPA urges recognition that national parks have a distinctive function to perform that is separate from the service of conventional tourism (see *TNPA News* No. 4) and calls on both the State government and the tourism industry to acknowledge this unique role, and to ensure that they remain the havens for nature conservation and self-reflection that they were originally set aside for. In this regard the TNPA supports the vision presently outlined

by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) in their Strategic Framework for Visitor Services in Tasmania's Parks and Reserves:

"Everyone who visits our parks and reserves is there to experience the natural and cultural areas at first hand: to be immersed in areas that feel largely untouched: to experience their beauty and tranquility"

The TNPA looks forward to supporting the PWS to achieve this vision and will follow the EOIs which may be forthcoming with great interest to ensure that the values presently protected within our national parks are fully maintained. (Note: For an inspiring insight into the role of national parks, I highly recommend the book by Joseph Sax "Mountains without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks").

In concluding, we do indeed live in 'interesting times'. The challenges ahead remain similar to those faced before and I thank all our members and supporters for continuing to support the work of the TNPA. In endeavouring to be the public voice on issues concerning the management of Tasmania's conservation reserves, I am reminded of the famous quote from Edmund Burke, "Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little."

Postscript:

In a move which appears to be yet another attack on environmental protection across Australia and the further disenfranchisement of the community, the Liberal Party's federal council, which meet in late June, has unanimously voted to strip eco-charities of the same rights permitted to other charities, including tax-deductable donations. Federal member for Bass, Andrew Nikolic, who introduced the motion, claims "these groups attract concessions and donations, then engage in illegal activities" (*ABC News*, 29 June). Mr Nikolic targeted groups such as the Wilderness Society, the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Bob Brown Foundation and all the Environmental Defenders' Offices as "engaging in the sort of activism that is at odds with Tasmania's future prosperity". And as the TNPA also has charity status I gather he is also accusing us of the same actions.

In response I refer to a media statement by the Tasmanian EDO, the community legal service that has provided legal advice to community groups (including the TNPA), local government, and small businesses for many years on a myriad of planning and appeal law and assists people to participate, lawfully and effectively, in decisions that affect them: "Our lawyers are professional, dedicated and well-respected.....The suggestion that we engage in illegal activities, or assist others to do so, is both false and offensive."

Unfortunately the community services provided by the Tasmanian EDO (as those interstate) have been significantly restricted due to the recent termination of their core funding by the Federal government. If possible, I encourage you to make a tax-deductable donation to the EDO Tasmania Rescue Appeal – while you can!

Robert Campbell (President, TNPA)