

Nature-Based Tourism –World Leader or Mediocrity?

They just keep on coming! The Tasmanian wilderness has never been under threat from so many proposals simultaneously:

- The Expressions of Interest process has resulted in many proposals for tourism developments in reserves which would be rejected under current management plans and the approval without public scrutiny of others.
- The yet to be finalised 2014 draft TWWHAMP removes most of the constraints on tourism development within the TWWHA.
- An additional downhill mountain bike track and a longer “epic ride” are foreshadowed for Mount Wellington. The “epic ride” has the potential to diminish the wild character of the Wellington Plateau (uniquely wild country so close to a major city) and both will improve the business case for the cable car by providing customers who need a one-way trip to the Pinnacle.

Not all the proposals are problematic but the abysmal standard of both the assessment and public debate does not bode well for their rational consideration. Most of the public debate on the Three Capes Track has either denied that there is an impact on the wild character of Tasman Peninsula or wilfully ignored it. Of course such a development has an impact! The question is whether the outcome justifies the impact. It would be helpful for future debate if we could focus on this.

The ostensible justification for these proposals is an intention to make Tasmania a world leader in nature-based tourism, to be achieved by the state government’s policy to “unlock our World Heritage Areas and national parks”.

But will this ultimately boost our nature-based tourism or reduce it to mediocrity?.

Wilderness is fundamental to the reason why so many visitors appreciate Tasmania today. It is also one of the world’s scarcest resources and becoming scarcer by the day. The world has plenty of “natural” areas where lakes are ringed by resorts and the peace and quiet shattered by sightseeing helicopters and floatplanes.

Given the importance of wilderness to Tasmania’s “brand” it is

extremely foolish to contemplate a tourism future which does not have the maintenance of wilderness as its centrepiece, yet this is exactly what is currently proposed.

The tourism “policy” of the present government is essentially “the market knows best”. There is an obvious problem with this approach – market forces dictate that short-term profitability trumps long-term sustainability. The tourism industry has an incentive to capitalise on wilderness, even if it is simultaneously degrading it.

With sensible management Tasmania can provide both a wilderness experience for users who want it, and a thriving nature-based tourism industry, into the future:

- Let’s make a selling point of Tasmania’s absence of “wilderness resorts”, scenic flights or cable cars disfiguring our mountains.
- Let’s acknowledge that “sensitive” architecture and “sustainable” design are not sufficient to make development in the wilderness appropriate.
- Let’s agree that we need a tourism policy with a vision for the future, not just an endorsement of the prevailing political philosophy that “the market knows best”. The policy needs to acknowledge the fundamental importance of wilderness and ensure that all proposed developments are tested against their impacts on wilderness.
- Let’s have an open and transparent assessment process for proposals on reserved land which guarantees public comment and appeal rights. In addition to ensuring a proper assessment, it would provide successful proponents with a social licence to operate.

The current “policy” of “unlock our parks and World Heritage areas” with little regard for the consequences may result in immediate profits for some in the tourism industry but in the longer term the onslaught on Tasmania’s wilderness will not only spoil Tasmania for those who appreciate its natural qualities, it will also diminish the tourism industry by undermining its fundamental attraction.