

# TRANSCRIPT

## ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria**

Melbourne — 25 November, 2013

#### Members

Mr T. Bull

Ms J. Duncan

Mr D. Koch

Mr J. Pandazopoulos

Ms L. Wreford

Chair: Mr D. Koch

Deputy Chair: Mr J. Pandazopoulos

#### Staff

Executive Officer: Dr G. Gardiner

Research Officer: Dr K. Butler

#### Witness

Mr P. Beaumont, executive director, land management policy, Department of Environment and Primary Industries.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Peter. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003. Any comments you make outside the hearing may not be afforded such privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. In saying that, welcome. Thank you for making your time available for your presentation.

**Mr BEAUMONT** — Thank you. As you said, I am the executive director, land management policy in DEPI. I am responsible for policy across generally the broad public land estate, which includes parks, forests and Crown land, so this inquiry is pretty relevant to my policy area.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much for bringing us up to speed in relation to that matter. Peter, you are aware that we have allocated half an hour. If we could have at least 15 minutes of questions, we would appreciate it.

**Mr BEAUMONT** — Okay. I have some background for you on public land and public land policy generally, talking about some of the key points relating to the terms of reference for your inquiry. First of all, public land provides a significant range of opportunities for heritage tourism and ecotourism. We have a diverse natural landscape, from alpine areas to coasts, waterways to deserts and forests to grasslands. The landscape provides abundant ecotourism activities such as camping, hiking, cycling, skiing and mountain climbing, or more relaxing activities such as fishing, birdwatching and boating.

Public land in the state covers some important tourist destinations, such as the Phillip Island Nature Park and the Great Ocean Road, and at the same time our heritage assets provide many opportunities for enjoyment of our cultural heritage, and that is both Aboriginal and post-settlement, with many buildings and diverse sites ranging from the Melbourne exhibition building to ancient Aboriginal heritage such as Lake Condah, and activities such as Puffing Billy and visits to sites such as Werribee Park and the Old Melbourne Gaol.

In terms of the public land estate, DEPI is responsible for managing Victoria's nearly 8 million hectares, or 35 per cent of the state. That covers national parks, wildlife and nature reserves of nearly 4 million hectares, just over 3 million hectares of state forests and nearly 800 000 hectares of Crown land reserves, state waterways and alpine resorts. Tourism and recreation clearly have an important purpose over much of these areas.

According to Parks Victoria, nature-based tourism generates around \$2.6 billion per year and supports around 41 200 jobs, predominantly using that public land estate. In terms of public land policy objectives, public land generally belongs to Victorians, and it is managed for the public good. There are a range of objectives in managing the public estate, as listed here. The key focus is community enjoyment of public land. That includes access and use, as well as ensuring that we can benefit from the environmental and heritage services the land provides. In particular, our national parks are an important public asset and are open to the public so they can be enjoyed in a responsible and sustainable manner. Balancing the range of those uses is an important part of managing the public land, and in doing so we have to keep in mind that some areas experience far less demand for their uses, such as some of our more remote national parks, while others are intensively used, such as our beaches and coastal areas. Particularly of note is the government's policy to enable sensible and sensitive private tourism investment in national parks where it is compatible with park values.

Much of our public land and its natural and heritage assets are well loved and well used. The public land estate enjoys approximately 130 million visits per year. DEPI and our partner agencies, such as Parks Victoria, support a large part of this visitation through a range of leases, licences and permits for tourism. The facilities and infrastructure on that land are important for ensuring a positive visitor experience, and they provide a significant number and variety of assets and infrastructure across our parks, forests and Crown land that support use by visitors and tourists. There are some examples there on that slide.

The Victorian government has been putting considerable effort into joint management of public land through agreements with traditional owners. Recently joint management arrangements have been reached with the Dja Dja Wurrung people in central Victoria, the Gunai Kurnai in Gippsland and the Yorta Yorta for the Barmah National Park. Existing cooperative management agreements are in place with the Gunditjmara in south-west Victoria, the Yorta Yorta in the north-east and groups in the Wimmera. We have had particular success with the Gunditjmara people in the south-west managing the Budj Bim landscape, including Lake Condah, where aquaculture has been practised for thousands of years. The Budj Bim National Heritage Landscape around the

Mount Eccles area was declared by the Australian government in July 2004 for its outstanding value as part of Australia's national heritage, and we are now reaching a point where Aboriginal groups can build on these arrangements and become even more involved in tourism enterprises.

Public land includes most of Victoria's important heritage sites. We have a rich diversity of post-settlement heritage sites on public land, and I sent you some of those you can see in the photos there, including on the World Heritage List the Royal Exhibition Building in Carlton Gardens; 13 places on the national heritage list, including Point Nepean, the Bonegilla migrant camp building and Echuca Wharf, just to name a few; over 400 Victorian Heritage Register places, of which DEPI manages around 275 and Parks Victoria 127; and more than 1000 local government planning scheme heritage overlay places around the state.

In terms of potential for greater ecotourism and heritage tourism, public land provides not just a service to Victorians and regional communities but significant opportunity to capitalise on expected growth and interest in nature-based tourism. At the moment we have two major projects under way — to develop the old quarantine station site at Point Nepean and a chalet at Mount Buffalo — through private investment, and they are aimed partly at tourism. There are many other sites across Victoria that have great potential across public land, but I note that considerable resources are needed to realise those in the long term.

This year the government released guidelines for tourism investment in parks and more recently the 'Making a proposal' guidance document for potential investors, which will enable us to hopefully realise this potential in appropriate areas of national parks with the help of the private sector, thereby helping grow our tourism sector. There are plenty of examples where this has been done well in other jurisdictions, such as the Cradle Mountain huts in Tasmania, which we would like to be able to emulate. This will of course be subject to strict conditions and oversight and will only be allowed in appropriate areas of the parks estate in Victoria. Victoria also offers great potential for cycling and walking trails, and the government is developing the Victorian trail strategy to support this. We will be continuing to support the development of new icon walks such as the Great Ocean Walk. That is the end of my presentation.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much, Peter. It is much appreciated.

**Ms WREFORD** — The committee has heard from stakeholders who are concerned about plans to allow commercial development in our national parks. Can you provide some examples of the type of developments that you would envisage in our national parks, especially in Victoria?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — I cited the Cradle Mountain huts walk in Cradle Mountain–Lake St Clair National Park in Tasmania before. That is an exemplar for what we would like to see in our parks. It is a small-scale, well-sited, well-run but also well-used operation that complements the park and attracts quite a lot of visitors, both domestic and overseas.

Perhaps another example is the forest walk in Western Australia — the name eludes me at the moment. It is within the national park in south-west Western Australia — the Valley of the Giants forest walk. While it is not based on accommodation, it is a fairly large drawcard within Western Australia.

New Zealand is probably one of the premier jurisdictions in terms of both the assets and the things it runs, such as the privately run huts in the national parks but also in terms of the marketing it uses that builds on the sites and the assets they offer.

**The CHAIR** — Peter, the committee has heard from some operators that limits should be placed on commercial licences within parks to ensure long-term viability of the businesses. It has also been suggested that the cost of a commercial licence could be increased to contribute to the cost of maintaining parks infrastructure. Do you think there need to be any changes to the current licensing framework?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — I think there is always scope to look at whether we are getting our best return. From a policy point of view we would not see the need to make changes at the moment, but there is always a need to make sure that we have sufficient revenue coming in to help maintain the parks estate and contribute to where we might add additional assets or services. At the moment the government has a regulatory impact statement on increased prices for camping fees. That is probably one example where we are looking at how we can cost recover for services in the parks. I would not say that we need to look at licences or how we run those commercial operations at the moment, but in the future there is always scope for that.

**The CHAIR** — I just raise it because during our site visits it has been mentioned to us that those with commercial licences believe a better job could be done with some of the assets that currently have no public control mechanism at this stage. That is why I raised it.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — In your slide on government-owned land I think you said that there are about 1400 licences or permits for tourism-type businesses. Does that include restaurants and cafes or are they a separate category?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — No, in terms of permits, that is generally for, say, people who want to take people into a park, so whether that is guided walks — —

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — That is operators?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — Yes, operators.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — So things like cafes and restaurants would be a separate — —

**Mr BEAUMONT** — They would have a licence or lease, not a permit.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — A licence? But it would be separate to that 1400? I am just trying to work out what the overall figure is. When we look at tourism it is about the overall experience. If there is a kiosk at the prom, what can they buy there apart from where they can lodge or whatever.

**Mr BEAUMONT** — I am just looking at my notes. We have 1200 leases, licences and permits. Unfortunately I do not have a breakdown of what they would be across.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Okay.

**Mr BEAUMONT** — Certainly generally we provide permits to people who do not run an asset or something or those who generally take visitors into the park. A lease or a licence is where you have an asset like a cafe and you have a building.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — As part of the new system, I am just interested in feedback on where DEPI is at. We have looked at some jurisdictions where they have access to parks or Crown land, say, for accommodation or a food business. The US Parks Service tells us that it has an 80-mile radius where it tries to source local food and services as part of its responsibility to keep the environmental footprint as low as possible. It provides a spinoff benefit where it can say it is focused on the eco side of things — seasonal food, local food, those sorts of things. As part of the potential for the new licensing arrangements, are you looking at factoring in those sorts of things or are you just leaving it up to the market to make a judgement in responding to the EOI process?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — We do not have a policy on that. We do not want to put too many limitations on the market as much as we can. Ultimately that is probably more of a marketing angle for the commercial operator I would say.

**Ms DUNCAN** — What is the relationship between the department and Tourism Victoria, and do you have any input into which sort of sites within Victoria may be promoted by Tourism Victoria?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — We work with Tourism Victoria on a number of issues. We have certainly been working closely with them as we have developed the policy and guidance documents for private investment in parks, for example. We know they are always on the lookout and wanting to both market and attract investors here. We have not gone through and directly identified sites as much as the opposite, which is more about being clear about the areas we would exclude. From our point of view our role is not about identifying suitable sites; we are really wanting the market and the private investors to tell us where they would like to go.

**Ms DUNCAN** — What sort of sites would you exclude?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — There are a number of areas we have said — particular remote national parks or what we call reference areas that are described under the National Parks Act. There are also areas that are considered too sensitive from a vegetation or geography point of view which we would say are not fit for activities or, say,

development of a building site, that sort of thing. We have a reasonably detailed map on our website which shows those areas which have been excluded.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Does that include Alpine National Park?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — There are some parts of Alpine National Park that are available, or we have said are not excluded.

**Ms DUNCAN** — I was not talking about tourism there, unless you wanted to go looking for cattle.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Is there a list of places of potential development? Because I have not seen it.

**Mr BEAUMONT** — No, we do not have a list. All we have is the geographic boundaries within the declared national parks.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — We know that Queensland has a couple of EOI processes at the moment. They are focusing also on the EOI process and they have their infrastructure guidelines et cetera, so they are trying to take a proactive approach rather than just an open market. When you said, ‘Approach us about what you think is viable’, they are taking an approach around what they think will make a difference from a tourism and ecotourism point of view. The government agency will go out to market on that EOI process to deliver a new product or facility. Is the department looking at that as well or just waiting for government guidance?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — We are certainly doing that at Point Nepean at the moment. We have an EOI out to the market on Point Nepean at the moment. That is really reflecting the rather unique nature of Point Nepean. At some stage we will probably be doing something like that again for Mount Buffalo. At the moment we are doing some works up there to enable a future private investor. Beyond that at this stage we are of the view that we do not want to fetter private investors. Generally they know what they are offering or what they are looking at better than government. Traditionally governments are not so good at trying to pick winners in a sense, so we would rather not do that, at least at this stage.

**Ms WREFORD** — Although DEPI’s primary role is land management, what role does the department see for itself in interpreting histories and stories relating to Victoria’s parks and landscapes? Does the department see a stronger role for Parks Victoria in promoting the heritage of the state’s parks?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — I am not sure whether you have had Parks Victoria come before you already, but I would probably say we would effectively leave that up to them. Generally we try to provide the governance arrangements for Parks Victoria and then let them manage the parks, given they are effectively the parks manager. So in answer to your question, we would have very little say in how they go about it.

**Ms WREFORD** — Do you have any views?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — The only view I would have is that we implicitly trust Parks Victoria to be able to manage their parks well, and we support them in doing that.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Peter. There were absolutely no politics in that response, but I will probably get the same response for the last and final question: what kind of conditions does the department think the developers who build and operate within national parks should adhere to? For example, should developers be required to adopt sustainable practices and follow environmental design standards?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — Yes, we would think so. We would have a very high benchmark. In our view, if we are going to allow someone to either operate or build something in one of our parks, they should meet the highest requirements both in terms of what they build and then how they operate their service. That will be a higher benchmark than we would expect if you are building on freehold land or elsewhere, but we think that is fairly reasonable if you have the opportunity to come into our parks.

**The CHAIR** — Have those priorities been established to date?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — We have a set of principles that are in our guidance documents that we have released, being fairly clear about what we expect in terms of both an environmental management system and how it

would be subject to fairly rigorous scrutiny. I think if there was any private sector operator who was expecting otherwise, I would be very surprised.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Peter.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Whilst DEPI's core role is in land management, I am wondering what the view of the department is in relation to interpreting the histories and stories relating to our parks and landscapes. In jurisdictions such as the US parks service, their starting point is heritage and the story of that site — ecology is part of it and the other part of it is indigenous people living there and then European settlement after that. So it is the describing of the stories rather than the managing of the land. Is there a role for DEPI in that or is that Parks Victoria's role? Or do you have a bigger role in that space and it is up to them to determine?

**Mr BEAUMONT** — I would say for our parks estate we very much leave that to Parks Victoria to do. They are far more aware of the heritage involvement of parks than the department would ever be, and we try not to second guess them or tell them what to say in that respect.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Peter. We appreciate your presentation and making the time available to come and talk to us today.

**Mr BEAUMONT** — Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**