

# TRANSCRIPT

## ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Halls Gap — 18 March 2014

#### Members

Mr T. Bull

Mr J. Pandazopoulos

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Chair: Mr D. Koch

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Executive Officer: Dr G. Gardiner

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#### Witness

Mr J. Clark, Chief Executive Officer, Brambuk National Park and Cultural Centre.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Welcome, Jeremy. Just as a formality, 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. You are aware that all evidence given today is being recorded, and as a witness you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, with instructions, in the next couple of weeks. We thank you very much for showing us around yesterday and for the opportunity now to put some information on the record. We have allocated up to half an hour, so over to you, if you are happy to answer some questions.

**Mr CLARK** — Okay. Thanks for inviting me. I am Jeremy Clark, chief executive officer of Brambuk Aboriginal Cultural Centre, or, as we are better known, the Brambuk National Park and Cultural Centre. Today I was just going to talk mainly on Brambuk and also on Indigenous tourism in general. Brambuk Aboriginal Cultural Centre opened in 1990. It is a not-for-profit organisation that represents the cultural and social concerns and interests of the five Aboriginal communities that have a cultural and spiritual connection to Gariwerd, which is the Aboriginal name for Grampians National Park. Brambuk is located in Halls Gap, within the park, and the national park is one of Victoria's most significant and popular national parks, famous for its rugged mountains, spectacular waterfalls, wildflowers, wildlife and Aboriginal sites.

The precinct known as Brambuk National Park and Cultural Centre integrates the Aboriginal cultural centre and the national park visitor services to provide a destination that offers outstanding opportunities for visitors to the national park. The Brambuk precinct provides an integrated tourism and cultural centre for visitors to this region and a meeting place and spiritual area for local Aboriginal communities. For information, activities, education, interpretation, tours and displays, as well as access to the environment of the Grampians National Park and its unique and valuable Aboriginal places, arts and stories, Brambuk is a living precinct that brings Aboriginal culture to life. The main objectives of Brambuk are to improve the profile and make Brambuk a 'must see' for visitors to Grampians National Park; to continually improve the Indigenous cultural heritage and environmental experience for visitors; to increase Indigenous employment in the region; to expand training and interpretation of cultural experiences, to develop community artists and cultural products amongst local Victorian Aboriginal communities; and to protect, preserve and promote cultural heritage.

Just in relation to Indigenous tourism, I know Victoria has a rich and diverse cultural offering right across the state. With the support and setting up of Brambuk in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Victoria was once a leader in Indigenous tourism across the country, but now it has probably fallen behind most other states in that regard. I think Victoria should embrace its Aboriginal history and support and promote it as a unique tourism opportunity. Many statistics show that our international visitors particularly show a distinct preference for experiencing Aboriginal culture. I know that *Victoria's Aboriginal Tourism — Development Strategy 2013–2023* has been completed, but I see it as a failed opportunity, with the same old ideas being pushed. There is nothing about supporting existing Aboriginal tourism businesses that require assistance, and there are a few of us around the state. Some have fallen by the wayside and closed, which has been unfortunate. We have an industry that needs to be supported, and the plan does not seem to cover that.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Before you continue, can you name some of the ones that have closed?

**Mr CLARK** — There was Kirrit Barret, which was located in Ballarat. There was one out of Shepparton that has closed up. Worn Gundidj at Tower Hill has had to reduce its operations. I know Narana Creations in Geelong is still open but is struggling. The Koorie Heritage Trust itself has gone right out of tourism. It is good to see the Melbourne Museum with the recently opened Wominjeka display, but we have always felt that the regions should provide the experiences. Melbourne is a good starting point, but it is the experiences that people want to have.

Just in regard to that plan or strategy, it had minimal consultation with Aboriginal people in the industry, which I was shocked about. It was a long process. We first heard about the strategy about five years ago, and there were some initial consultations and then there was nothing until the draft strategy and final version were released. That strategy does not mention Brambuk once. I was astounded that the plan did not recognise the oldest Aboriginal cultural centre in Australia, a centre with major international recognition, or the Grampians, a place rich in cultural sites, heritage and stories, as a strength or an opportunity. I do not have much faith in the strategy.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Were there any marketing dollars attached to it to support the sector?

**Mr CLARK** — I do not think there were any dollars attached to it. I did hear that a bid was put up for it which was unsuccessful, but I am not sure on that.

Back to Brambuk and some of the community benefits of Brambuk. Brambuk is the largest attraction in Halls Gap. It provides authentic Aboriginal experiences to visitors. It promotes reconciliation and breaks down stereotypes. It contributes to the local economy through employment and use of local services and contractors. It is essential to the region's tourism offering. It provides a lot of benefits, but there are also a lot of challenges, and you have probably heard today about some of the challenges facing the region. I will list some of those that affect us.

The obvious one are natural disasters such as bushfire becoming a regular occurrence. We know there is not much that can be done about that, but it does not help our business. Unfortunately we need money to survive, and the disruption to visitation and cancellations that occur every summer really do hit the bottom line. There is also the continuing effect of the GFC. People's spending habits have not quite got back up to pre-GFC levels. International visitation has reduced, and the people who are coming are not spending as much. There is a change in domestic travel habits with the higher dollar. People are travelling overseas. There is also just a change in travel habits. Everyone is becoming too busy and not staying for extended periods. It is more like that three-day getaway. People are becoming harder to capture.

At Brambuk we have ageing infrastructure and equipment. The building itself is owned by the state, yet we have no maintenance budget and no maintenance contract. We do not know who is supposed to maintain the building, and it is starting to become a bit of an issue.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So is it technically owned by DEPI at the moment?

**Mr CLARK** — Yes, and DEPI have probably not made contact with Brambuk for over 15 years. We do not know who to talk to within DEPI or whether they are responsible. It is an issue.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Who puts up an ERC bid for upgrades to the building? It would be DEPI, would it not?

**Mr CLARK** — It would be, yes. Technically it is located on national parkland.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So are you, in effect, a rent-free tenant?

**Mr CLARK** — Yes. We occupy the building. I am not quite sure what the agreement was. I do not think there is any agreement in existence. It happened in the 1980s. There probably is an agreement, but I am not aware of it.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So just to differentiate, is that for the older part, the cultural building, versus the cafe, the shop and all that?

**Mr CLARK** — Yes.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So does the newer part actually have an agreement,?

**Mr CLARK** — Yes, the new one does. There is an agreement between ourselves, Parks Victoria and DEPI, but there is no agreement over the — —

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — When was that agreement made?

**Mr CLARK** — It was made in 2006, when the building was commissioned. Staffing is an issue for us. We always try to get Aboriginal people into jobs and have them work for us delivering cultural programs along with hospitality and retail services. But we have difficulties in getting staff, and there are a few reasons for that. One is the competing industries in that job market. Family and cultural responsibilities are an issue. There is also the isolation of Halls Gap, which I heard mentioned before. Halls Gap is a tourism town — a resort town. That means it is busy for half the year and dead quiet for the other half. That is a challenge in itself. We support Grampians Tourism and other bodies trying to change how that works throughout the year, but it is a constant challenge.

Resources required in getting Aboriginal people, particularly young Aboriginal people, work ready are an issue. As I said, our point of difference to a lot of places is that we provide authentic Aboriginal experiences. People, when they visit Brambuk, can talk to an Aboriginal person. Surprisingly that is a very big thing. The chance just to talk one-on-one with an Aboriginal person is a highlight for visitors, particularly international visitors.

Since 2005 Brambuk and Parks Victoria have worked in partnership to provide services on site. This partnership contributes financially to the site. Due to budget cuts that Parks Victoria has incurred, this financial contribution will be changing significantly, putting Brambuk under major financial pressure and forcing us to review our operations. There is the distinct possibility we may reduce our offerings on site.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — So what does that all mean in dollar terms and in terms of their reduced contribution?

**Mr CLARK** — Currently we have a management services agreement with Parks, so Brambuk delivers all their visitor services duties. We also delivered an education component, and there was also a component that supported the administration, so it is cooperating funds. That was justified through Brambuk providing Parks with cultural advice, and always their policy for anything they required in regard to Indigenous affairs, supporting park management and the like. The education component and administration component have been cut, so we have been advised. We will still have the visitor service component, but it means a cut of about \$300 000 out of our operating budget.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Per annum?

**Mr CLARK** — Per annum.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — What is that share of your income?

**Mr CLARK** — That is a third of our income. We have been awaiting a new management services agreement, but Parks has said it has got no money, it does not want those services provided any more, so deal with it. Whilst we have always strived for economic self-sufficiency, the nature of the industry, the challenges we face and the high operational costs of operating a centre such as Brambuk put us in a perilous situation. Whilst we do our best to generate revenue, and assistance in the form of marketing, business plans and the like from other agencies are always available, we require some core operational funding to keep the doors open basically. Such support is required to ensure Brambuk's future. As I mentioned before, Brambuk provides a large community benefit and we feel it is more diverse than places like art galleries and museums, which obviously are in the public interest. If Brambuk ceased to exist in its current form, its demise would be a huge loss to Aboriginal people, the tourism industry, the region and the state of Victoria. I know everybody is doing it tough, but we are doing it pretty tough as well. That is pretty much my contribution.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — As a cultural product, are you eligible for any Arts Victoria funding?

**Mr CLARK** — Not that I am aware of.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Tell us a little bit more about the distinct business units you have got. You have got the cafe and the shop. What other income-earning components are there? You have got the educational bit — I am assuming you charge a fee — and tours.

**Mr CLARK** — Yes, we have our cultural activities, which include our schools program, and our tour products out into the park; that is one. Another is our hospitality, or cafe, and another is our retail and information centre. Sitting behind all of that is our administration, which is made up of two people — myself and our finance manager. We are then responsible for keeping everything running, the relationship with Parks, marketing, all the business red tape, and everything else. We only have those three income-generating areas.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Do you have any accommodation on-site?

**Mr CLARK** — Brambuk has an associated entity that runs the backpackers.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The backpackers is a separate business.

**Mr CLARK** — It is a separate business. It provides the administration for that, which provides a small amount of income to the administration.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Is each of those areas profitable, or are some profitable and some cross-subsidised?

**Mr CLARK** — The information service is subsidised with the Parks agreement, but that is a profitable area. The cultural area is currently subsidised with the Parks Victoria funding and breaks even. The cafe receives no subsidy and makes a loss. Our administration area receives some subsidy at the moment through our agreement, but that is being cut.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Is the shop run separately?

**Mr CLARK** — We put the shop and information together as a work area. I suppose when I talk about core funding, it is more our administration. If we were able to get some support to operate our administration area, we feel everything else would be able to look after itself. It is just some of that core operational funding, which the state has provided in the past through various agencies. But that is all coming to an end now, when we probably need it most.

**Ms DUNCAN** — I want to move away from that a little bit. How is local Indigenous heritage being preserved and conserved within this whole region, and presumably that is through your relationship with Parks Victoria? How does all that work?

**Mr CLARK** — You can probably split that into two parts. You have the cultural heritage protection, as in site protection works, and that is done through the registered Aboriginal parties process. The cultural heritage we look after is the stories. We are also a keeping place, so it is all those cultural assets that we hold and maintain, and information; so that is what we seek to preserve and protect.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Do you have a lot to do with the actual sites within the park? Is that all done through your RAPs?

**Mr CLARK** — We used to. Before the legislation changed in 2006 Brambuk had core responsibility for that in the national park, but since that change we have not had that responsibility, no.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Was that also a source of income?

**Mr CLARK** — Yes, it was a significant source of income. With the challenges we have faced and the losing of those responsibilities, we have had to do a lot of work on the bottom line over the years with reduced revenue and everything else while remaining sustainable, but these latest cuts might be a bit hard to swallow. I suppose that is the main point of my message.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — The region here is unique. When I look at our terms of reference, it is the only one that has a heritage component integrated with a parks and environment component. Yet it has never seemed to have completely melded together. It has got closer, then this happens and it is walked away from; then there is some new discussion again. It is interesting to us. Here you have got the highest concentration of Indigenous rock art in Australia, and really no-one knows about it. We do not do much about it, Parks does not do much about it. Most of it is not accessed. You guys probably do not go out there and promote it, partly because you are not supported, partly because you are not sure about the market, so it is a bit of a chicken and egg situation. Talk to us about where you want to be. Where is the real vision out here integrating that sort of stuff above and beyond Brambuk being viable?

**Mr CLARK** — It is not about reinventing the wheel. A lot of good things have been done in the past — for example, a lot of work was done on the rock art, recording rock art sites and researching them. Unfortunately we have lost what a lot of the meaning of the art is through history. A lot of work was done in the 1970s and 1980s, like with tourism, with the development of Brambuk in the 1980s. I do not know whether it was the government of the time or the policies of the time, but a lot was happening. Not much has happened since. Then there was the name change push, to change the Grampians National Park to the Gariwerd National Park, which the Aboriginal people supported.

All those things were fantastic, but they have all come to a standstill. We would like to see things like the name of the national park revert to its traditional name of Gariwerd. We would like to see dual signage at the very least throughout the park, for the Aboriginal story to be told in the park. The park is marketed on its natural assets, and that is great, but there is a whole layer of Aboriginal heritage that is not part of it. If that happens, it will lift the profile of Aboriginal people and the profile of our heritage.

Regarding the art sites you spoke about before, there are only five that are open to the public, due to vandalism, protection concerns and the like. Those five have steel cages at the front of them, and they are not very visual. A lot of those cages were put in in the 1980s, so they are ancient protective measures. They are not very inviting for visitors. There are many more art sites within the park that are in inaccessible areas. We would love to be able to utilise some of those sites, but at the moment there is no security for them. If knowledge of those sites becomes widespread, the risk of vandalism and the like is too great.

I hope I am making some sense. As I said before, I would love Aboriginal culture and heritage to be incorporated across the board, whether it is names, information or experiences. It should not be a difficult thing, but it has been in the past. It could be the start of something. As I said to you all yesterday, the common misconception is that all the Aboriginal experiences are up north. We do have them in Victoria — it is something to be proud of — and how we lift the profile of what is already here is the challenge.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — In the past it has been raised with us by different groups. Is it about world heritage listing? We have Lake Condah and the eel traps out there. Do we link up important Indigenous sites as multiple world heritage listings, as has been done with convict sites in Australia? Is there any particular view that the Indigenous community has about that in Victoria? Would that help to position where you want to be in terms of the legitimacy of the first inhabitants?

**Mr CLARK** — Possibly. I would need to speak with the Gunditj Mirring mob about how they have found the whole process with the Budj Bim landscape — Lake Condah — world heritage listing. I am really not sure what the value is, apart from the protection of it. The Grampians would be eligible for world heritage listing, but as to what benefits that would provide, I would need to be more informed.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — Generally the feedback we get is that it helps drive visitation, particularly with extra exposure and the tick-a-box tourists who want to get to the top-end sites that are acknowledged to be top end.

**Mr CLARK** — The other thing is the Grampians Peaks Trail, which you have probably been informed about. It also has the potential of lifting the profile of the area. Let us not forget that the Grampians has a big international profile already. That is something it already has, particularly in the Western European countries. It is almost on their must-see list, especially if they are in Victoria.

It is about the natural beauty. I go to tourism shows and the like, and there are not many places in Australia where you have the mountains and the natural environment and, within that, almost rainforest-type conditions in some areas. You have the mountains and the Aboriginal heritage of the place. Within an hour and a half drive to the north-west you have desert, and within an hour and a half drive to the south you have the beautiful coastline. A little further on you have Cape Otway, with rainforests and the like. We have so much within such a small space, and we do not seem to take advantage of that, whereas in the Northern Territory, which has some of those things, you have to drive 6 or 7 hours to get to the next stop. I do not think the assets Victoria has are being realised as much as they could be. I am not sure what the answer is, but it is an interesting thing to ponder.

Also, there is the fact that there is an Aboriginal population here, and it has a unique history. It is not a happy history, and I say to people on a daily basis, ‘Don’t be shocked or ashamed about what has happened; it is just about acknowledging and moving forward’, but if we can acknowledge the Aboriginal connection to land and first nations, that is a very good starting point to be able to move forward. Everybody can celebrate the Aboriginal heritage of the area.

**Ms DUNCAN** — I do not know where the other sites are in the Grampians, but is the Grampians Peaks Trail an opportunity for a site walk as well — that you do not get to see it unless you are part of that walk? I assume you could walk right past them and not know they were there, so is that another opportunity? Is that something you are working on as part of the development of the trail? Are you at the table for the development of the trail?

**Mr CLARK** — I have been in the past, but not recently. I was a board member of Grampians Tourism in its establishment phase in the first three years. We see a range of opportunities available with the trail, and they are economic opportunities for Brambuk and the local industry in general. To what extent, I am not sure, but there is potential.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Why are you no longer part of that group?

**Mr CLARK** — I stood down from the board. I served my time. I had become busy with other things. But it was good. It was a fantastic experience, and it has lifted the marketing of the Grampians region significantly. I spoke earlier about the six-months-on six-months-off thing we suffer with here with tourism visitation, and they are doing a lot of work to try to spread that throughout the year, which would help significantly. When you only have a certain time to make money and for the business to generate income, things like bushfires have a huge impact on that because it is only a limited opportunity you have. For the rest of the year it is really about trying to keep the doors open and survive. Make hay while the sun shines.

**The DEPUTY CHAIR** — We might leave it there. Thanks very much, Jeremy. As I said, a transcript will be forwarded to you with instructions. We appreciate your coming along today and spending part of a couple of days with us, so thank you.

**Mr CLARK** — No worries. I appreciate the opportunity.

**Committee adjourned.**