

# TRANSCRIPT

## ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria

Melbourne — 7 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 R. Hillman, chief executive, Ecotourism Australia.

**The CHAIR** — On behalf of the committee, I welcome Rod Hillman to our public hearing in Melbourne today. I know this is not your natural landscape, Rod, and we certainly very much appreciate your effort in joining us from the northern state — Queensland. I know the lights are down in here but I think that is a blue-and-white Cats tie you are wearing. It is a very sensible colour code and very agreeable to the Chair, who is a great Cats fan.

In your capacity as chief executive of Ecotourism Australia, all evidence taken at the 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. In saying that, all the evidence given today is being recorded. As a witness you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of weeks.

Again, Rod, if we could work on about a 10-minute presentation and 20 for questions, that would be much appreciated. We look forward to your contribution. Thank you.

**Mr HILLMAN** — Thank you very much, much appreciated. I do not have a presentation, but I just have a short prepared statement I would like to start with.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Mr HILLMAN** — First I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to present on this important subject. I certainly find it very reassuring that the Victorian government, through this committee, recognises the importance and benefits ecotourism can bring to Victoria. I am here to represent Ecotourism Australia, which is a network of Australia's leading ecotourism operators, individuals and organisations that have chosen a sustainable business approach that brings benefit to the environment and the community by supplying and promoting enjoyable and meaningful experiences to visitors.

Our organisation is a not-for-profit entity with a broad membership base. Its purpose is to inspire environmentally sustainable and culturally responsible tourism. To achieve this we work closely with members, government agencies and other organisations to deliver high-standard programs, certifications, advocacy, conferences, networking, philanthropic opportunities, representation and workshops. We have 54 eco-certified tour operators in Victoria. We have formal agreements with Parks Victoria and have held our annual conference in Victoria twice. I want to acknowledge the strong support we have always received from Parks Victoria and Tourism Victoria; they have both been doing a great job, according to our members. We certainly appreciate the relationship we have with those two organisations.

Ecotourism has been identified as a major growth area in Australia's economy. This has been backed up by the previous people who were talking. Tourism Australia's marketing program is focused on Australia's natural advantage. The CSIRO identified the future megatrends for tourism, and I brought a few papers I can leave with the committee to illustrate this.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you.

**Mr HILLMAN** — The CSIRO, through its Futures program, has identified the megatrends for tourism. It identifies quality experiences and Australia's natural areas as the absolute key areas for growth. Deloitte has stated that tourism is in the top three opportunities for Australian business over the next decade and again identifies Australia's natural advantage as the key area of growth in there.

These and other reports are clear: nature-based and ecotourism are the future. Victoria has the opportunity to position itself as a leader in nature-based and ecotourism. In the past Victoria had a clear plan — *Victoria's Nature-Based Tourism Strategy 2008–2012* — the aim of which was for Victoria to be recognised as the leading sustainable, nature-based tourism destination in Australia, renowned for its diverse and accessible natural attractions. This is an effective plan that provides a clear direction to the industry, with an action plan and policy directives. The industry wants certainty. Well-designed and resourced planning documents like this encourage industry to invest in and develop their product.

I am unaware of an evaluation of the plan now that its time frame is complete, but we hope that this is under way, as not having a current plan or a process to develop a new plan for the future of ecotourism in Australia is a huge wasted opportunity. Other states in Australia have already recognised this need, with the most recent

being Queensland, which has launched its own Queensland ecotourism plan. They launched this in August, and it has a very similar aim to Victoria's previous plan. They want to be Australia's premiere ecotourism destination and have declared tourism to be one of the five pillars of the state's economy.

I would strongly recommend that Victoria reactivates its own nature-based or ecotourism plan and builds on the excellent work done in the last four years. Without a plan it is unlikely Victoria will reap the benefits that the most reliable agents in Australia and the world are predicting. Ecotourism by its very nature promotes investment and job creation to regional areas. It builds the destination's profile, pride and identity, as demonstrated by the National Landscapes program, and brings support to the state's protected areas, as ecotourism operators are bound by their ethics to contribute to the conservation and community within the area.

The specific questions asked by this inquiry are addressed in our submission, but one issue I would like to discuss is the controversial issue of development within national parks. There are many divergent views here, with strong support for a no-development approach where members of conservation groups are philosophically opposed to any commercial development and see this as the thin edge of the wedge: once the door is open, more is sure to follow. History would show that once areas are open, they are rarely, if ever, closed.

Not all tourism operators and developers are to be feared. Many have a deep and abiding conservation ethic, and Ecotourism Australia supports a measured and case-by-case approach to this issue as long as strong protective measures are in place. National parks and other protected areas are special places, and the standards that people and organisations must adhere to need to be much higher than elsewhere. Above and beyond the current guidelines, there needs to be a range of further protections and considerations — meaningful protections from the 'what if' scenarios, where a development may not be successful or have unintended consequences. Either a robust insurance measure or bond should be required; otherwise the park — that is, the Victorian government — will be left to clean up the mess.

A one-solution approach without taking into account individual park and community needs is unlikely to be sustainable or successful. The needs of the destination as a whole should be considered, and the impacts on the current tourism businesses should be assessed. Existing operators should be given favourable treatment if an opportunity arises; they are the ones who built the destination and the ones who will be most impacted by any new development. They created their business when the opportunity in the park did not exist, so if you create a new opportunity, they should be looked at.

Incidental and secondary impacts should also be assessed. What is the impact on the entry and exit points to the park? What about the workflow to the park staff themselves and the appropriateness to the local area tourism destination plans, which are a requirement of National Landscapes areas specifically? What about visual amenity and other aesthetic values and impacts on other recreational opportunities within the park itself? Critical to all this is ensuring best practice operations. Again, parks are special and need to be treated as such. Any commercial operation of a park must operate at a higher standard than elsewhere.

The easiest tool for this is through third-party endorsements, such as certification. Ecotourism Australia has a long history in Victoria and throughout Australia in working with tour operators, protected area managers, tourism managers and governments and would like to assist wherever possible. Currently I sit on a range of national and state reference and advisory committees representing the expertise of 500 eco-certified tour operators and broader membership, and we would welcome the opportunity to contribute further in Victoria. We already have a longstanding partnership with Parks Victoria that we want to grow, and we want to increase our commitment to raising standards of tour operators in Victoria's national parks. Parks Victoria already recognises and rewards tour operators that have achieved our ECO Certification, and building these incentives and programs is a future opportunity for us both. Raising the standard of Victoria's tourism awards by ensuring that any nominee for the ecotourism award holds Parks Victoria-endorsed certification would go a long way to making a clear statement to the broader industry and customers of the importance Victoria places in high standards.

If the decision is to develop a new ecotourism plan for Victoria, then Ecotourism Australia would like to contribute in any way possible. We can represent the industry on steering committees or reference groups, provide independent facilitation of workshops and meetings, provide expert advice on ecotourism and certification, and work with our Victorian members to collate feedback and input on the plan's development and

implementation. For example, in the Queensland ecotourism plan we contributed strongly to the development plan and have been identified as a key partner and leader of many action items from the plan.

For ecotourism to thrive you need skilled, motivated, engaged tour operators who deliver quality experiences. They need well-resourced and well-managed national parks and other protected areas, as these are their product. They need state and local governments who understand and give support by providing planning and resourced departments, by removing barriers and by rewarding tour operators who are doing the right thing. They also need destinations that want tourism and provide an environment that encourages tourism. In closing, I want to applaud the Victorian government for creating this inquiry and again thank the committee for this opportunity. We would welcome any questions. Thank you.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Rod. If I could pose the first question to you: could you outline the process that an operator goes through to participate in one of your certification schemes? What are the costs associated with the certification, and how often are operators audited to determine whether they are complying with your own standards?

**Mr HILLMAN** — Thank you for that question. Ecotourism Australia runs four different certification programs. Our main certification program is called ECO Certification, and it has three levels. Nature, Eco, and Advanced Eco. We are not saying one is better than another, just that there are three separate niches that we acknowledge. The certification is there for a business as a business development tool but also to demonstrate to its customers that this business follows the principles of ecotourism.

The second certification program is climate action. That is where, again, you have three levels, and it is a way for a company to demonstrate what actions it is taking to manage its impact on climate change.

The third program we have is Respecting Our Culture, which was developed by Aboriginal Tourism Australia, which is no longer in existence, and because of our relationship with them they handed the program over to us. The purpose of that certification is for a tour operator to be able to demonstrate to their customers that they have engaged with the traditional owners in that area, they understand the stories, they understand the protocols in place, they know what stories they can tell and what stories they cannot tell. Like all our certification, it is a process. So many tour operators find this a very challenging area in terms of how to engage with traditional owners in the area, and this gives them a process to walk through that is designed by Aboriginal people for non-Aboriginal people to do.

So we have both Aboriginal organisations and non-Aboriginal organisations accepting and respecting our culture. At Ecotourism Australia we think this is so important that we now include it in our ECO Certification program. So if you were to take up ECO certification now, we would get you to complete the ROC certification as well, just as part of the package.

**The CHAIR** — Cost associated with it, and auditing?

**Mr HILLMAN** — Sorry, the fourth one is for individuals. That is the EcoGuide Australia program, which applies if you as an individual want to demonstrate your skills. In terms of the costs involved with the certification programs, the climate action and the ECO certification prices are worked on revenue. So the cheapest entry point is if the revenue of your organisation is less than \$250 000 a year. In that case it starts at \$440, and then it goes up such that if your revenue is over \$10 million a year, you are looking at around \$1300.

**Ms WREFORD** — That is per annum?

**Mr HILLMAN** — Per annum. It is annual renewal.

**The CHAIR** — That is fine, and the auditing process employed?

**Mr HILLMAN** — The auditing process is that once you are certified you will then be audited some time within each three years.

**The CHAIR** — In saying that, Rod, has that reflected any negatives you did not anticipate, and have you lost members due to the audit process not coming up to the standard of your expectations?

**Mr HILLMAN** — We have an audit program under way as we speak in Victoria. The feedback we have had from that audit has been very positive. We have found that tour operators look forward to the audits and see them as a positive thing because we approach the audits as, ‘You have told us you’re doing these things, let’s check to see that you’ve done it, and while we’re here, let’s work together on that’. The aim of the certification, as with the aim of our organisation, is to promote ecotourism and get as many people following these beliefs and ways of doing business as possible.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you very much.

**Ms WREFORD** — That is really good and I think you are doing a great job. In terms of educating people around ecotourism, what is your view on the ability of the general public and visitors to understand eco accreditation, and is there any way in which you think accreditation schemes could be simplified or the education of tourists improved? I suspect that that might be one of your sticking points.

**Mr HILLMAN** — Certainly. We have a few things in there. One is getting customers aware of certification. That is an enormous challenge. For example, T-QUAL is running now. That is a national program for certification. The federal government has spent about \$4.5 million to \$5 million promoting that program, and not many people know about it. So trying to promote certification directly to customers has proven extraordinarily challenging for anyone. We are a very small organisation. Our approach is to work with tourism organisations and especially with protected area managers. So we work with people like Parks Victoria here, where they create rewards and benefits for certified operators, and then they provide exclusive access in the different areas and PR benefits and things like that which get more people into the certification, and then the customers see the logo attached to the operators when they are doing it, and then that starts a conservation.

**Ms WREFORD** — What I am hearing is that there is still a fair way to go before the visitor actually understands what this is about.

**Mr HILLMAN** — It changes from region to region. For example, in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park area, from the point of view of protect area managers — and no disrespect to Parks Victoria because we have a very good relationship with them — but they are the strongest supporters of eco certification via protect area manager in Australia. We have over 100 certified marine operators operating in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. Eighty per cent of all passengers who go on tours in the Great Barrier Reef are carried by eco-certified operators and that is purely because of the support that GBRMPA provides to certified operators.

If you are certified operator operating in the marine areas of the Great Barrier Reef, you can get up to a 15-year licence, and if you are buying large boats and these types of things, to go to a bank and say, ‘I have a licence for 15 years’ compared to saying, ‘I have a licence for one year’ — I know who the bank will give the loan to.

**Ms WREFORD** — So do you think, though, that the visitor is making a choice to specifically go on eco-certified tours?

**Mr HILLMAN** — There is absolutely no doubt about that. GBRMPA has produced records every year of the number of eco-certified operators because they call them their high-standard operators, and you go onto their website and they are the only ones that they list. They are the only operators that GBRMPA advertises and they are the high-standard operators. They are the ones with the advanced certification. So they have tracked it over the last eight years, and that is why I know it is 80 per cent that are carried now. When they started their records — because we have been going for 22 years; we are not a new thing — about 20 per cent of passengers were carried by certified operators. Now it is 80 per cent. So there has been a shift by customers towards choosing certified operators.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Thank you, Rod. From feedback from any of your members in Victoria, could you tell me three things that they like that are not broken about the system in Victoria and three things they would like improvements or change on?

**Mr HILLMAN** — I think the first thing that operators like is the relationship they have with the on-the-ground staff. So in the individual parks, the rangers, the district managers, the individuals in the park that they work with on a daily basis — they think that relationship is good. There seems to be strong support for your industry council, Dianne Smith is running there and doing a very good job — and there seems to be strong support within the industry for that to occur. There seems to be a lot of respect for Tourism Victoria, the way the

general marketing campaign is going such as the Jigsaw campaign and *Run Rabbit Run* and those types of programs, which are being imitated right around Australia. South Australia is certainly taking examples of what you are doing and moving it there. So they are probably the three big things that the operators are liking.

Things that they would like more of — and I am speaking on behalf of ecotourism members — but they would like to get more significant and meaningful benefits for doing the hard work. It is to the benefit of a park to have more certified operators. Certified operators have demonstrated very clearly that they are following a set of guidelines and the parks have agreed that these are the behaviours they want from their tour operators. From a risk management point of view, it is very good policy for a park manager to have more certified operators in there. All the research says that the experience a visitor most wants is to talk to a ranger, but you can never employ enough rangers to do that. Alysia was saying earlier there are 350 commercial operators operating in parks. They all have a range of staff and they are all talking to guests every day, so it is our belief that the messages those visitors are getting through certified operators are more accurate, sympathetic and life changing and it is a higher quality experience than they will get from other ones. A certification program is a business development tool so as you are going through your business is better.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Rod, should there be an international standard for accreditation? Would that help consumers?

**Mr HILLMAN** — Probably not. It is an interesting discussion. About 15 years ago our ECO certification program we are talking about here, which was originally called NEAP, was clearly seen as the world leader. Australia has really not progressed at the speed that other countries around the world have on that. Where we were clearly the world leader in this area we are now not quite at the level of leadership we were before.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Why do you think that is?

**Mr HILLMAN** — Because other countries have seen the benefits and invested more in it; they are taking it seriously. Ecotourism and nature-based tourism in Australia is always talked about as, 'This is the next big thing'. Every report that has ever come out has always said that nature-based and ecotourism is the future. It is no longer a niche. Ecotourism is mainstream.

If you thought about going on a holiday 15 years ago, what was then extraordinary were just basic things like your towels, your soaps and different things; if you do it now, all the things that were extraordinary 15 years ago that we have been saying, 'You should be doing these things' are now just mainstream. They are just a given.

Many countries are getting ahead of us on that; they have a different story to tell. You are talking about much more of a community, whereas in Australia ecotourism very much has a nature focus. In Australia ecotourism is seen as part of the nature base, whereas overseas you will see it as much more of a community base; it is seen as a tool to empower people. Ecotourism is not really seen as a purely nature thing; it is seen much more as communities coming together asking, 'What is the best way to allow our community to move forward?'.

I have just returned from four years in Papua New Guinea, where I was managing the Kokoda Trail. I spent time talking and sitting with the communities living along that track asking them, 'Why do you want this tourism?'. It is not about nature; it is about putting food on the table. It is about sending kids to school, it is about that empowerment. Australia has gone down this path of saying, 'It is all about nature', but the rest of the world — certainly the developed countries — have much more gone down the path of, 'Hang on, this is a community development tool'.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — I just have a short final question. We as a country have a very strong focus on simple words like 'cutting red tape'. That could mean all sorts of things. Where is the balance between cutting red tape and having appropriate minimum standards?

**Mr HILLMAN** — This is always challenging. The pendulum does this all the time. Certainly from an operator's point of view you do not want a lot of red tape, but you do want some. I live in Queensland so I will use a Queensland example. The government announced that it was going to get rid of permits for whale watching. That was the absolute last thing tour operators wanted. In an attempt to get rid of red tape they went too far and they have now swung back.

You do need laws, you do need regulations and you do need some red tape, especially when you are talking about your protected areas; you cannot get new ones. You have established your values and you have your parks in place. There is certainly room to create new parks, but the ones you have you have to value. You have to ask for a higher standard of behaviour within parks than outside. From our organisation's point of view, we do not advocate for the eradication of all red tape — you need to have some — but certainly some could disappear. Certainly the combination of different agencies requiring different things and they are not talking to each other.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Are you aware of any examples in Victoria of operators saying, 'We've got to cut this red tape in Victoria'?

**Mr HILLMAN** — I would prefer to talk out of session on individual cases, but there are certainly some.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Rod. On behalf of the committee, we very much appreciate not only you journeying to Victoria but also your contribution here today.

**Mr HILLMAN** — Thank you very much.

**Witness withdrew.**