

# TRANSCRIPT

## ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE

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

Port Campbell — 25 October 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. Grant, executive officer, Geelong Otway Tourism.

**The CHAIR** — Welcome, Roger. Thank you very much for joining us here this morning for our public hearing on our inquiry into heritage tourism and ecotourism in Victoria. I indicate to you that 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. As a witness you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript in the next couple of weeks. Roger, it is good to see you participate not only in the submission but in coming to the public hearing and speaking to us. We look forward to your presentation. We have about a half-an-hour allocation, Roger. Thank you very much.

**Mr GRANT** — Fine. Thank you, Mr Chairman. I do come with a bit of a unique perspective today. I will just very briefly outline my background, and I think you will see that I have had 30 years vested in nature-based tourism in Victoria. Some 30 years ago I was working for the Department of Sport and Recreation and could certainly see the relationship between public land, outdoor recreation and tourism. I was awarded an Anzac fellowship to work in New Zealand, looking at the conservation agencies in New Zealand, then the Department of Conservation, and how they integrated tourism within their planning and in their day-to-day operation. There was and still is a greater synergy between public land management and tourism, probably one of the best in the world. I worked there for about eight months, came back and was appointed as tourism manager for the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands. I was tourism manager there for about eight years. During that time I developed the ecotourism strategy for Victoria. It is ancient history — it is 20 years ago now — but there are some elements in there that I think are worthy of reflecting on and worthy of revisiting. I have given you a copy in your folder on that. It was adopted.

One of the interesting things you will see in the foreword here is that it is actually signed by the director-general rather than the minister, and that was simply because it was in the caretaker period in a change of government. So whilst it was accepted by government, it never got a chance to actually be implemented. I must say from when I re-read it the other night that it does make you wonder where we would be now if it had been adopted some 20 years ago, for the very things that we are considering at the moment. They certainly resonated and were identified as a real opportunity back then.

Subsequent to that I was then awarded a Churchill Fellowship where I worked with the US parks service looking at the relationship between tourism and public land management. Again, if you ever needed an example of how the private sector and the land management agencies, the national parks — which, by the way, is an American concept; that is probably one of their greatest legacies to the world, the whole concept of national parks — when you go to places like Yosemite, Sequoia, Kings Canyon and Yellowstone you see that there are lots of lessons to be learnt. It does not necessarily mean you have to sell your conservation soul to be able to effectively work with the tourism industry and deliver a product that actually enhances the natural values as well as enhances the visitor experiences. I am pleased to hear that you are heading over to Tassie; I think there are some good examples over there as to what can occur.

**The CHAIR** — Roger, the committee has recently undertaken a study tour of the west coast of America and Hawaii, and we are right up to speed with what you are raising.

**Mr GRANT** — Right. Terrific. Again, it is quite inspirational when you see what can happen, and it does beg the question as to, ‘Well, let’s make it happen here. Why hasn’t it happened here?’. I am pleased with the recent legislative changes and certainly the opportunities that they bring into play. Just reflecting on — and, again, I know it is ancient history; when you look at the photograph of me back in 1993 I think you get a good understanding of how ancient that is — —

**The CHAIR** — I guess, Roger, in many ways we are about tomorrow.

**Mr GRANT** — That is right, exactly. Nonetheless, I think there are some really interesting concepts that are still as valid. Firstly, the whole concept of ecotourism is quite narrow. Really, if I had to say today how many ecotourism operators there are within this region, I would say probably two or three — in this state, probably a handful — the reason being it is very much about not just running a quality tourism experience but also taking positive financial or content research back to the environmental cause itself. If you mention it will go to places like the Great Ocean Ecolodge and Conservation Ecology Centre — Lizzie Corke down at Cape Otway — their level of support in research and the contribution they are making back to the environment is certainly a classic

example of some of the very best ecotourism operators. But the majority of operators are about nature-based tourism, not so much the precise definition of ecotourism as such. It is a bit broader in that.

It has been identified that it is an area of great significance and a great opportunity for the state. We do have a very wonderful legacy of public lands, but from a tourism point of view, we are not really capitalising fully on that estate. It is about how we do it and how we best do it. When you look right across the state I think there are a variety of assets that can certainly be enhanced through additional strategic investment and some framework in which ecotourism and nature-based tourism can occur. And of course there are the job implications. In fact the very reason this original strategy was done some 20 years ago was about job generation. The nature of ecotourism, the nature of nature-based tourism, is that there are wonderful job opportunities, which I am sure you are aware of.

If you want to turn to page 20, I will quickly go through the major points of that strategy. The first point was — back then, and I still believe it is the case — that Victorian should clearly declare itself as a major ecotourism destination. So it should be very much part of Tourism Victoria, Parks Victoria — the whole public land network — making a declaration and a commitment to that competitive advantage. The second point that I think is really at the heart of ecotourism and nature-based tourism is content. What I am talking about with content is a clear articulation of the fauna, flora, geology, Aboriginal history and European history. In fact in many parts of Victoria that content, as it relates to the public land system, is not available to that degree, nor is it accessible to the tourism industry.

That is the very reason why we, Geelong Otway Tourism, in partnership with the private sector, developed that comprehensive guide to the Great Ocean Road, again, not just as a saleable book, but to provide the content to the tourism industry so that they are telling a more comprehensive story — a story that resonates, that has reality, about those very competitive advantages. Now, whilst that is done in a paper format, I would put to you that with modern technology it should now be delivered in a digital form, and that should be right across the whole state. There should be such documentation for the high country, for Gippsland, for the Murray — for those whole areas that have a wonderful and unique story to tell. Again, it is about content and it is very much about being able to provide assistance to the tourism industry to tell those unique stories.

Through that I think we should also have a look at targeting education travel to Victoria. Again, you would have seen in the parks system in North America the work that they do and their partnerships with academic institutions, within the United States but also globally. There are programs like the Elderhostel program and the University of the Third Age. To go on some of those programs — and the partnerships they have with the universities to run programs over the summer months I think are really first class. Likewise the state has a range of really good research facilities, like the Arthur Rylah institute. That is a wonderful opportunity for a partnership with those research institutes and the tourism industry — the tour operators — to disperse that unique research in a far broader way. I am certainly advocating for the advancement of the production of education and other support material, particularly in a regional context.

I think also we need to have a look at the development, implementation, training and accreditation of tour operators and private guides. Again looking on a national basis, there are some wonderful opportunities now that are being delivered out of Queensland — the Savannah guides. In fact I am the chairman of the Great Ocean Road National Landscape. At our recent forum in the Blue Mountains we discussed the whole issue of national accreditation and the enhancement of guides. That is worthy of examination and support.

It does worry me when you listen to some of the information delivered by tour operators. It starts to move from fact to fantasy and from education to entertainment. At the end of the day, I am not talking about the delivery of dry academic information, but it does need to have credibility and relevance to the particular destination. We are so concerned about this on the Great Ocean Road that we have initiated a study to have a look at the quality of the visitor experience. Is it meeting their expectations, particularly for day coach operators? We suspect that in fact it is not. So again, that is another opportunity to have a look.

We believe the production of quality material that highlights the opportunities and experiences in Victoria needs to be looked at — particularly its potential delivery in a digital platform rather than just in the old printed copy. One of the projects we are looking at on the Great Ocean Road is the development of a series of wi-fi hot spots right along the Great Ocean Road, so that the visitor will be able to stop at places and download detailed information about that specific site, which may even include historic augmentation. You might be able to hold

up your iPhone or iPad, look at the Twelve Apostles and then actually have a look at what they look like and how they were developed. Some of the technology is unique in terms of how it can deliver the message. More to the point, it can also allow visitors to generate content and freshness and really enhance the experience through that digital platform, so that you will be able to stand at the various locations. For example, at the Great Ocean Road archway you will be able to look at the diggers building the road, and upload your latest image onto the official websites or Facebook pages. Again there are really good opportunities there.

The seventh point I put down 20 years ago is the facilitation of private tourism developments on public land. Again, when you have seen what could be, I remember as tourism manager saying at the time to the senior management that as a park agency we were delivering — and I still believe it is the case — facilities that do not demonstrate best practice in environmental construction and design. Yet we say to the private sector, ‘No, you can’t come in here. It is too special’. With effective management and control, there is a win-win: a win for the environment and a win for the tourism industry through quality experiential accommodation and attractions.

If we do not deliver this, we will not deliver the yield that the tourism industry is so desperate for. Simply walking on a beach, whether it be at Gibson Steps, or on the Great Ocean Road walk is not going to generate the level of economic activity that we need. So again that infrastructure is absolutely critical. For example, look at the aerial walkway recently put in on the north rim of the Grand Canyon and see how that enhances the experience. It is not the Disneyfication of national parks, it is appropriate sympathetic infrastructure that actually highlights it. You could imagine a glass walkway that connects London Bridge again. You could imagine the impact that would have on dragging visitors beyond Port Campbell. That sort of primary driver of visitation is a great opportunity.

I said back then that we need to develop industry guides for the access rights of tour operators into the national park and public land system. At the moment I honestly believe we are offering too many licences within some of the national parks. That makes it not viable for any individual business. You only have to look at the Great Ocean Walk as a classic example. There are so many operators there who are cutting themselves to pieces. There needs to be some rationalisation, and there needs to be some enhancement of quality.

Another point I said at the time was that there needed to be a tourism operators liaison committee. When you look at what is happening within the land conservation agencies and the land management agencies, tourism is falling off the agenda. At a time when legislation provides a golden opportunity for potential partnerships with the private sector — at that very time — we are starting to see the culture of tourism being integrated within their thinking, diminishing and the senior staff who were involved in tourism not being replaced. There is a real challenge within the public land management agencies. We know their primary objective is conservation. We understand that from a tourism industry point of view, but tourism is integral and can be part of that conservation message. If people do not visit and do not understand or appreciate the parks and the parks just become monuments to landscapes, I do not think that is a great outcome for the parks or the visitors.

**The CHAIR** — A couple of minutes, Roger.

**Mr GRANT** — Yes, okay. The final point is: to establish a specific funding pool, including committees of management, to undertake ecotourism-related works.

They were the guidelines. As I said, I know they are ancient history, but they still resonate today. I do not think there is one thing there that does not still resonate. The other point is there is still a culture where the tourism industry and tour operators are considered to be in some sense a bit of a parasite on the public land network rather than being seen as a real opportunity and potential for partnership. I wrote way back then: ‘Tour operators as allies, not foes’. I still believe that has not been picked up to the degree to which it should, nor has the opportunity that it provides.

The Great Ocean Road has led the way in terms of some of the tourism planning. We have completed the destination management plan, and there is a big push to develop similar documentation right across Victoria. That plan is now integrated into Regional Development Australia, and that is really critical because it means that when the regions are talking with government, both at a state and federal level, the priorities from a tourism perspective are fully integrated and prioritised within the regional request to government. You are not getting tourism saying one thing, economic development saying another thing and municipalities saying another thing. That document looks at what are the key game changers from a tourism infrastructure point of view. That has

now been taken to the next level with the development of an investment prospectus. The identified critical game-changer projects are now being worked through Austrade, Tourism Australia, the investment section of Tourism Victoria and Regional Development Victoria. That provides critical content for anyone, whether you are in Shanghai or Geelong, looking at a project that provides a framework from which you can commence the investment decision process. That is a really good example.

Mr Chair, I have probably rabbited on a bit long, but — —

**The CHAIR** — We will not tell anyone, Roger. You have done well. Each of us will pose a quick question. I know Jo would like to raise one.

**Ms DUNCAN** — Thanks for the presentation, Roger. Your comments about developments in parks — are you talking about national parks or all levels of parks? Are you talking as a general statement or about this particular linear park we have along the Great Ocean Road?

**Mr GRANT** — There are opportunities within the linear park scenario. We are obviously having input into the master plan. Again, in a philosophical sense I honestly believe, as I said before, that appropriate development does not have to be to the loss or the detriment of the environment. If it is appropriate development, it can actually be a win-win scenario.

**Ms DUNCAN** — And are you talking about major developments, are you talking about accommodation or are you talking about walking trails or — —

**Mr GRANT** — Both. I mean, a classic example is the Great Ocean Walk. In fact, it is identified in the business plan. I think the opportunities for the private sector to develop appropriate accommodation similar to what we are seeing in New Zealand and similar to what we are seeing in other parts of the world are terrific, I really do. I think, again, it is about the management of that process to ensure that the development is appropriate in scope, scale and design.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Sorry, Roger, can you just explain what that accommodation comparison is — what we mean by accommodation?

**The CHAIR** — Yes. This is not new?

**Mr GRANT** — No. In general terms I am talking about nature-based lodges. We are not talking about — —

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — How many people they would cater for and that sort of thing.

**Mr GRANT** — That's right. You would be talking in numbers of 40 to 50. We are not talking about picking up a Crowne Plaza 321 model and banging it in the middle of the national park. It does have to reflect its location, it does have to capitalise on the design, and we are starting to see some really good examples of that. As I said, in Tasmania you would have seen a couple, like the Freycinet Lodge. You can go to these sorts of developments, which I think really provide an enhancing experience, not a detrimental experience.

**Ms WREFORD** — Just a couple of points. The first one is around accreditation schemes. I think this is something that anyone in the industry grapples with — —

**Mr GRANT** — You are not wrong.

**Ms WREFORD** — But how would you see it all coming together if there was a scheme? First of all it needs to be simple for tourists to understand. But my belief is that it needs to be more than a national scheme; it actually needs to be an international scheme, because you are also talking about tourists who are coming from overseas. So is there a scheme around how that will all come together? Do you have any ideas?

**Mr GRANT** — Yes, there certainly is. I am one of the delegates on the United Nations World Tourism Organisation, and we are looking at a global scheme of accreditation. We have not got it nationally, so I think we have got to go there first.

**Ms WREFORD** — I don't think we — —

**Mr GRANT** — But the big point is that — and I think your point is very valid — unless it means something to the visitor, it does not actually create a point of purchase.

**Ms WREFORD** — Absolutely.

**Mr GRANT** — So an operator that is accredited and has done the work should have a competitive advantage in the marketplace. At the moment that does not exist. There is a recognition of that globally and there is a need, and that journey is being looked at.

**Ms WREFORD** — As soon as you have the answers, can you let us know?

**Mr GRANT** — It is on the United Nations World Tourism Organisation agenda, but it is not an easy one to fix, because nationalities have invested in and guard that accreditation process. Only yesterday I was contacted by Norway and also by the UNWTO to look at accreditation standards within the accommodation industry, so they are starting to have a look at that as well.

**Ms WREFORD** — That sounds good. Just one other thing, you brought up a study you are doing about the experiences people are having.

**Mr GRANT** — Yes, that is right.

**Ms WREFORD** — When is that going to be completed, and when it is complete what are you going to do with the results?

**Mr GRANT** — The study has just commenced. We would anticipate that it will be completed within three months. We are working with the coach industry and the day-tour operators. When those results come out, depending upon what they are, we will be taking that up through the Victorian Tourism Industry Council, and through VTIC to government to try to establish a framework.

**Ms WREFORD** — The committee might also be interested.

**Mr GRANT** — Yes, absolutely. I am more than happy to share that with you. I can send you a copy of the brief. The Great Ocean Road is the no. 1 day-coach tour operation in Australia.

**Ms WREFORD** — Is that why that road is in so much trouble?

**Mr GRANT** — That is partly why the road is in so much trouble — I think some of the underpinning infrastructure. But, again, it was terrific that we were able to secure the commonwealth and state partnership to upgrade the road, and, boy, is it needed. But you are right — we are starting to see, particularly with the emergence of China and India, the coach market coming back again significantly. We are concerned about the licensing and we are concerned about the quality of the experience. Is it meeting visitors' demands? I suspect not, but we need to have the information to be able to quantify that.

**The CHAIR** — Roger, in closing, can I firstly thank you very much for joining us this morning. Your knowledge really is appreciated. We have one other question. You brought to the attention of the committee this morning the thinking for the last 20 years.

**Mr GRANT** — Yes.

**The CHAIR** — We have not anchored that to the ground. Is it going to take another 20 years to actually get this on the ground — particularly with the Great Ocean Road, whether it be through the operators, through accreditation or through accommodation and also moving the mindset that tourism on the Great Ocean Road in particular is not a 24-hour event?

**Mr GRANT** — No, I do not think it has to take 20 years at all. I do think there is a direct correlation between resourcing and the acceptance of tourism as a legitimate part of the public land management process. That is why we are really pleased that we are doing the Shipwreck Coast master plan. But the lack of senior management within land management agencies with an understanding and appreciation of and connection with the tourism industry does worry me.

**The CHAIR** — And the commercial side.

**Mr GRANT** — Absolutely. To give you an idea, in America they are employing someone from the private sector to represent the park service in negotiations with Delaware North for the concession management contract at Yosemite. So it is a different mindset. We are saying, 'Hey, we're not experts in this, but we will bring in experts and contract them to government to do those negotiations'. I think that is the sort of thinking that needs to take place.

**The CHAIR** — Thanks, Roger. John, my apologies for missing you.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — That is all right. Thanks Roger. Just building on the point of how things are still relevant 20 years after. Looking at those recommendations, my view is they are saying the same thing. Imagine if we started on them a few years back. Just further, in relation to the way that we manage parks, the sense I get from other jurisdictions in the park service is that they have a stronger focus on incorporating heritage as a core part of parks — heritage and environment. My sense here is that there is a stronger focus on environment and we forget that heritage part, whether it is heritage landscapes, the indigenous communities or other things of significance, as part of the settlement process. Could we just get your comments on that? Do you think it is important that we have a holistic approach or is our approach, of focusing solely on the environment without looking at environmental heritage, really too narrow?

**Mr GRANT** — No, I think the broader concept is of most relevance. That is why I am really pleased that I have given you in your kits the information about the concept of national landscapes. I think the whole concept, again, is really worthy of being looked at. I am the chairman of the Great Ocean Road National Landscape. There are only three in Victoria: the Great Ocean Road, the Alps and the East Gippsland coastline around Croajingolong. They are the only three national landscapes. That was brought in to recognise from a tourism perspective and also a visitor perspective that you really should look at world heritage, which is about conservation value, as a guide to which are the best parks to experience. Again, it is a better understanding of the partnership between conservation and tourism, but it is also recognises that tourism is not just about the nature side; it is also about the heritage side.

One of the projects we have just been funded for is the establishment of the Great Ocean Road National Heritage Centre at Lorne, which tells the story of the construction of the Great Ocean Road. I think that is a fabulous opportunity, a wonderful combination of federal, state and local government funding. It will be open early in the new year, and will celebrate the unique history of the construction of the Great Ocean Road. In many ways, up until the 75th anniversary some five years ago that story had been forgotten — the connection with the diggers and the connection as one of the great post-World War I projects. I think it is a wonderful story, which enhances the visitor experience. I think there is a lot of other history. It is a real challenge on the Shipwreck Coast, because you do not actually see shipwrecks. I think there the anchor is about the only thing you can see of the wreck of the *Fiji*. So we have some real challenges about how we present and interpret that.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — Just to build on that, these same jurisdictions overseas have as a core focus — their starting point is their Indigenous heritage.

**Mr GRANT** — Yes.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — So when you talk about environment and you talk about Indigenous and heritage, your starting point is always Indigenous?

**Mr GRANT** — Yes.

**Mr PANDAZOPOULOS** — It seems to me to be something we respect, but there is a missing focus as a starting point.

**Mr GRANT** — That is a real challenge. I was involved in establishing the Brambuk facility and also the Danya centre up in the Barmah Forest, and Lake Condah, and the difference is that when you are dealing with the Indigenous people of North America, there is a live and living culture. I am not being dismissive, but through history they are a real challenge in Victoria. The real challenge is to tell not a general Aboriginal experience because too often, even when you go into these centres, you get the Pitjantjatjara story, the dot points, the didgeridoo, but as you are probably aware there were no didgeridoos in Victoria south of the Murray.

So that whole concept of, 'Well it is not real Aboriginal unless it shows' is our real challenge. It is doubly difficult when you have a culture in the Aboriginal local sense that has lost a lot of that history. I think there is a real need, in partnership with academia and research, to try to rekindle that and give it back, and the likes of Lake Condah has been identified in the plan as a potential absolute game changer, a potential world heritage area, to be perfectly honest. It tells a very different story.

**The CHAIR** — Thank you, Roger. We appreciate your time this morning.

**Mr GRANT** — Thank you.

**Witness withdrew.**