Executive Officer,
Environment and Natural Resources Committee,
Parliament House,
Spring Street, East Melbourne. 3002.

Dear Sir,

In responding to the Environment and Natural Resources Committee’s inquiry into Heritage Tourism and Ecotourism in Victoria we strongly object to the State Government’s proposed Guidelines for Tourism Investment in National Parks in particular giving developers 99 year leases of national parks – in other words privatising whatever public entity that will make a profit. Regrettably the Victorian Government appears to be following the lead of New South Wales and Queensland governments who are currently dismantling environmental laws which previously protected their national parks from destruction caused by mining, logging and cattle grazing.

The primary role of National Parks is the conservation of nature such as preservation of old growth forests which provide habitat for the many endangered species relying on trees and hollows for survival. A secondary function is to provide some relief from our over-developed, over-crowded, suburbanised cities as Victoria’s unsustainable population continues to grow. National parks provide outdoor recreation spaces for informal or passive recreation including activities such as picnicking, fishing, hiking or simply enjoying the sights, sounds and atmosphere of the surrounding environment.

However if changes are made to long-standing principles and processes of park management under approval of 99 year leases, there may be demands for active recreation including hunting, shooting, fossicking, trail bike riding and pleasure driving. With active recreation and intensity of use conflicts and problems can arise making it difficult for land managers to control especially when their numbers are being radically reduced. An example given is a proposal to allow mountain bike riding on some of the tracks in Wilson’s Promontory National Park. This approach is opposed by Friends of the Prom on the grounds that mountain biking is incompatible with high pedestrian use of the proms tracks.

A further incompatible use in national parks is fossicking. Government approval for prospectors to operate in eight of Victoria’s national parks can cause siltation of waterways, disturb heavy metal deposits left over from early gold workings, encourage the spread of weeds and threaten a number of rare species including ground orchids. Hunting is a recreational activity harmful to the environment because of the introduction of Sambar deer to the forests. This deer can be hunted all the year round with bow and arrows, guns or trailing with hounds. This a cruel activity dangerous not only to hunters but also to other unwary park users. Above all the deer are yet another invasive feral threat introduced to the national parks ecosystem.

The State government’s “wish list” foreshadows the possibility of allowing mining in national parks despite the inordinate cost of the controversial technique of fracking. This procedure uses a high pressure mixture of water, sand and chemicals to crack open shale rock and has the potential to contaminate and deplete scarce groundwater because of the high volume of water required for shale fracking.

(Business Age 5-6-2013)
The State Government’s generous offer of a 99 year lease is being extended to developers tendering for large scale tourist infrastructure in sensitive heritage locations such as Point Nepean Quarantine Station in Point Nepean National Park. The government claims that “public land belongs to all Victorians and equitable access to public land opportunities should be provided.” Providing developers with “opportunities” and equitable access to build expensive high rise accommodation could put such accommodation out of reach of the general public thereby denying them “equitable access” to facilities in the national park. Such development at Point Nepean if approved will detract from historical, landscape and environmental values of the site. (Age 30-5-2013)

Before a new jetty with possible “over-sea accommodation” is built in Point Nepean National Park it may be advisable to check the destruction of Portsea beach following the completion of dredging of the shipping channels in 2009. A costly attempt by DSE to protect the beach with a wall of textile sandbags failed with erosion continuing up to the tree line and subsequent tree loss. Huge boulders have now been installed but the beach has gone. What has certainly changed since channel deepening finished is Portsea beach and the strength and frequency of ocean swells now able to enter the Bay and pound the beach.

Since European colonisation of Victoria in the 1830s the forests and woodlands, grasslands and wetlands have been heavily impacted. In 1869 Victoria’s forests and woodlands were estimated to extend over 20 million hectares covering 80 percent of the State. Studies have shown that over 65 percent of Victoria’s forest and woodland cover (some 12 million hectares) has been cleared. In fact of all the Australian states Victoria has the largest amount of clearing.

With the massive land clearing in the 183 years since European occupation it is imperative that what is left of our magnificent Red Gum and Mountain Ash forests are protected rather than be subjected to further destruction resulting in irreversible loss of ecosystems. Unfortunately the State government has opened up national parks for prospecting, firewood collection and the reintroduction of logging in River Red Gum parks, put decisions about sustainable logging in the hands of profit driven VicForests and approved an open cut gold mine in the Wombat Forest near Daylesford.

Previous Liberal state governments carried out investigations leading to new national parks, introduced a Green Wedge policy and Victoria’s first biodiversity strategy. It is disappointing that the present Liberal government is not supporting the valuable work of VEAC and instead is being influenced by the short term divisive policies of the National party thereby undermining nature conservation gains made over decades.

Mary Rimington
Secretary
MBCL

REFERENCES.

1. Jason Dowling and Tom Arup, “Private leases plan for national parks” in the Age 30-5-2013
2. Hannan, Peter “Rich shale gas supply comes at a price” in the Business Age 5-6-2013.
3. Native Vegetation Clearance, Habitat Loss and Biodiversity. Biodiversity Series. Paper No.6 Biodiversity Unit, Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, Canberra, 1995