

NSW National Parks and Tourism Planning: Public assets up for grabs.

John Edwards 4th December 2008

Funding for the much-needed management of the State's national parks has always been woefully inadequate, and has allowed critics to take more and more 'free kicks' at the expense of the Parks Service as time goes on, particularly in relation to fire, weeds and feral animal control.

In Mid 2007, the Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF), a proclaimed tourism lobby group, released an Action Plan for putting more tourism into Australian national parks, pushing for private investment in parks, increased tourism focus for park management, and 'pre-approval' by government of development opportunities which are then offered to industry.

It is the mention of 'private investment' and 'industry' that raised my initial concerns, and a year later I represented the North Coast Environment Council at a meeting in Sydney with Verity Firth, the then Minister for the Environment. At that meeting she announced a campaign to increase Park visitation by 20%, which included tourism initiatives, but ruled out Hilton Hotel type development in National Parks. It seems State Government was listening to TTF, and liked what it heard – the sound of money.

Last week we received an interesting article compiled by Ian Brown which I feel should be of interest to all those concerned about the future of national parks. This report explains the history of TTF and its infiltration by corporate interests, including the Property Council, Lend Lease, Leighton, Macquarie Bank and Multiplex. According to records of the NSW Electoral Funding Authority and Australian Electoral Commission (available at www.democracy4sale.org), these corporations have donated a total of close to \$1 million to the NSW Labor party, at least \$776,000 of it prior to the 2007 election.

Read on for the cronological evolution of a corporate raider – TTF.

A chronology of recent events highlighting the role of the tourism industry lobbyists

(compiled by Ian Brown as at 17-11-08)

1989: The Tourism Task Force is formed to deal with the aftermath of the pilots' strike and as a voice for the Australian tourism industry.

(Reference: www.ttf.org.au).

2003: The Tourism Taskforce is rebranded as the Tourism and Transport Forum (TTF) to include the transport and infrastructure sectors. TTF is "a national, Member-funded CEO forum, advocating the public policy interests of the 200 most prestigious corporations and institutions in the Australian tourism, transport, aviation and investment sectors" and the "peak industry group" for these sectors.

(Reference: www.ttf.org.au).

Recent TTF claimed achievements include "the successful introduction and implementation of the \$235 million Tourism White Paper and the \$11.8 billion Auslink White Paper, and the increasing acceptance among Governments of the Public Private Partnership model of infrastructure funding." In the future, TTF are "set to play a key role in the framing of the National Tourism Strategy and Aviation White Paper – having worked with the new Federal Government to drive both strategies onto the agenda".

(Reference: www.ttf.org.au).

2004: TTF publishes an influential report: "A Natural Partnership: Making national parks a tourism priority".

2005: The NSW Government amends the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979 by introducing a new Part 3A to "streamline" approval processes for major projects. The amendments limit public participation and the environmental assessment required for major projects.

(Reference: Environmental Defender's Office, www.edo.org.au/edonsw/site/part3a.php)

2006: TF conducts a media and lobbying campaign in NSW highlighting the state's poor tourism performance.

(Reference: TTF media releases obtained from NSW government under FOI).

2003-07 (prior to 2003 and March 2007 NSW elections): Significant corporate members of TTF (including Property Council, Lend Lease, Leighton, Macquarie Bank and Multiplex) donate a total of close to \$1 million to the NSW Labor party, at least \$776,000 of it prior to the 2007 election.

(Reference: Records of the NSW Electoral Funding Authority and Australian Electoral Commission, available at www.democracy4sale.org).

2007 (undated, before March): In the leadup to the NSW state election of March 2007, the TTF sends a submission to all NSW MPs entitled “State Tourism Recovery Plan for NSW”. The submission states that Sydney is the only Olympic city to have suffered a decline in visitor numbers after the event and that NSW was losing market share to other states. It also says: “This document shows how Treasury’s lack of support for tourism is damaging our Olympic legacy. The industry can no longer accept excuses as to why the rest of the country is prepared to invest in tourism and reap the benefits, but not NSW”. (Reference: TTF submission obtained from NSW government under FOI).

2007 (February): NSW Premier establishes a review into tourism in NSW, headed by John O’Neill. The head of TTF writes (26 February) to Mr O’Neill on his appointment to say he was ‘personally delighted with the Premier’s announcement of your role in the reviews, which accords with our requests of the Government’. O’Neill report follows in April 2008. (Reference: TTF letter obtained from NSW government under FOI).

2007 (March): NSW state election. Labor is returned to power.

2007 (July): TTF releases an Action Plan for putting more tourism into Australian National Parks (based on “A Natural partnership”, 2004). Recommends private investment in National Parks, increased tourism focus for park management and ‘pre-approval’ by government of development opportunities which are then offered to industry. Suggests more tourism can supply funds for conservation through ‘partnerships’ but offers no quantitative evidence to support the claim. (Reference: <http://www.ttf.org.au/Content/ntpi07.aspx>)

March 2008: TTF releases a Queensland Action Plan for putting more tourism into National Parks. Recommends amending park legislation to make tourism a principle objective and to allow private tourism development in parks. (Reference: <http://www.ttf.org.au/Content/ntpqlld08.aspx>)

April 2008: John O’Neill delivers his report into Tourism in NSW to the Premier. O’Neill is subsequently appointed to head a new body, Events NSW.

10 June 2008: O’Neill report into tourism in NSW is publicly released. Refers to National parks as ‘state-owned tourism assets’. Calls for a shift in ‘philosophy’ away from protection as the priority for park management, and opening of parks to private tourism development. Criticises tourism planning and management in NSW, and the low level of government support. (Reference: “Review into Tourism in New South Wales, Final Report, for the Premier of New South Wales The Hon. Morris Iemma MP”, by John O’Neill AO, April 2008. Seems to be no longer readily available on internet)

19 June 2008: NSW Ministers for Tourism and Environment jointly establish a ‘Taskforce on Tourism and National Parks’. Based on an interpretation of State Plan objectives (to increase tourist visits to NSW, to increase investment in rural and regional areas and to increase visitation to State Government parks and reserves by 20% by 2016). Draft report due at the end of September and final report by November 2008.

The announced 21 July deadline for public submissions was extended after pressure from environment groups. Environment groups are not directly represented on the Taskforce, despite having in-depth involvement in National Park creation and management for more than 50 years. (Reference:

http://corporate.tourism.nsw.gov.au/Sites/SiteID6/objLib28/NationalParksTaskforceToR_4web.pdf)

11 July 2008: In a meeting with environment groups, the Chair of the Taskforce on Tourism and National Parks raises the prospect of amending National Park legislation to facilitate tourism development.

13 August 2008: Minister for Tourism announces the ‘release’ of a ‘draft strategy for NSW tourism’ in response to the O’Neill Report, but no document is publicly available. The main points of a strategy to be put to cabinet in September were discussed with industry and then endorsed at an industry meeting on 13 August with no input from the broader community. Minister says a ‘greater focus’ on National Parks is a ‘key component’ of the strategy.

(Reference:

http://corporate.tourism.nsw.gov.au/Sites/SiteID6/objLib57/080813_DraftTourismStrategy_web.pdf)

11 October 2008: NSW Premier Nathan Rees announces a major festival program on Sydney Harbour National Park islands for 2009, called “Island Hopping”. The Sydney Morning Herald reports that Mr Rees said the festival was a first step to finding a way to “use our national parks to give families a greater opportunity to experience their natural beauty”. NPWS staff say they knew nothing about the plan before the announcement. (Reference: Sydney Morning Herald 11 November 2008).

October 2008: TTF publishes a report *Tourism Infrastructure Policy and Priorities* which makes recommendations to major national policy reviews. Recommends reform of “planning, regulatory and approval regimes to permit sustainable private tourism infrastructure in national parks and other reserves”. Includes priorities for infrastructure in NSW national parks, such as new accommodation.

(Reference: www.ttf.org.au/Content/tourisminfrastructure1008.aspx)

6 November 2008: TTF welcomes a NSW Government decision to lower the \$20 million threshold for certain projects to be determined by the Joint Regional Planning Panels - to \$10 million for tourism developments and \$5 million for ecotourism developments. TTF has “long been advocating” this change.

(Reference: www.ttf.org.au, media release 6 November)

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