

Ginninderra Falls Association

Promoting the Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park



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Submission to Inquiry into Current and Potential Ecotourism of the ACT and Region

The Ginninderra Falls Association (hereinafter termed the Association) was formed with the aim of promoting and encouraging the development of the Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park in the southern region of Yass Valley Shire where it borders the Australian Capital Territory.

For about 150 years generations of visitors have been coming to this part of NSW to admire the spectacular river systems, rapids and waterfalls. In that time the land area has been developed by the rural industries that have included sand and gravel quarrying. The area is currently under private ownership. There were a few years when the Ginninderra Falls and adjacent Murrumbidgee River corridor were opened to the public as a privately operated recreational park with a small entrance fee. Unfortunately, since 2004, public access has not been possible because of prohibitive increases in the cost of public liability insurance. Some accident victims are currently still in court seeking damages some ten years since that era.

The Association believes that it is now long overdue to re-establish long-term public access for the benefit of present and future generations of Australians. The Australian Capital Region must promote its tourist and regional recreation assets to the maximum extent. The Association believes there are present and future pressures on the proposed national park area for subdivision and private development that will forever compromise the area for public use if nothing is done. It strongly contends that the area should be returned to public ownership.

The ever-increasing population within the borders of the Australian Capital Territory and in the surrounding regions of New South Wales greatly enhances the viability of a fee-paying national park, the Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park, operated by the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service. Attached to this submission is a background document that outlines the boundaries of the proposed national park and various aspects of the natural environment and ecotourism potential within these boundaries.

The Association contends that the area of the proposed Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park is *the premier development that has potential to add considerably to ecotourism in the Yass Valley Shire*, catering for the needs of a large nearby population.

The Association wishes to address a number of matters listed in Attachment A, Inquiry Terms of Reference. The issues are addressed on the following pages. The Association also notes the large area considered as the

Australian Capital Region, an area that includes the Snowy Mountain, the NSW South Coast and the shires north to Young, Boorawa and Upper Lachlan.

a) The extent to which organisations currently deliver ecotourism activities in the Region.

Within the Australian Capital Region there are a large number of Government and non-Government organisations involved in ecotourism. At a State/Territory Government level these would include the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service and the ACT Parks and Wildlife Service. Local Government agencies manage public lands within the shire boundaries. In the non-Government sector, ski field proprietors manage significant land areas under strict guidelines and contribute to the public interest in national parks and wilderness area.

The Ginninderra Falls Association contends that grassroots community-based groups also contribute very significantly to the wide interest in ecotourism. Groups such as the National Parks Association, Friends of Aranda Bushland, and many other such organisations, including our own Association, are instrumental in spreading community interest in the natural environment and the pleasures and satisfaction that are derived from visiting well-managed public parklands.

Community-based groups richly deserve the encouragement and support of Governments at the Federal, State/Territory and Local Government levels in the development of ecotourism.

b) The extent to which these organisations' ecotourism activities demonstrably contribute to, and detract from, conservation and restoration of ecosystems throughout the Region.

Organisations such as the National Parks Association within the ACT and NSW contribute very significantly towards the reservation and development of public lands as areas that are valuable ecotourism destinations. One only has to consider the community push over many years to develop the Namadgi National Park and the neighbouring Australian Alps National Park stretching from Victoria to the ACT. This year the NSW Government reservation of lands within the Sydney Basin to protect from coal mining activities is a more recent example.

Within the ACT the National Parks Association has played a major part in restoring the former pine forest areas of Namadgi National Park to native bushland. Recreational fishing groups plays a significant part in the maintenance of healthy river systems and the monitoring of discharges from sewage and industrial sites into creeks and rivers. The clearing of willow trees along waterways is a significant contribution to maintaining healthy waterways.

The Association also contends that there are threats to national parks and public lands from illegal vehicle use and the degradation of managed public lands. One can think of deliberate destruction of parklands by 4WD vehicles in remote areas such as the Deua National Park. The illegal release of pigs into wilderness areas for sports shooting is also to be condemned.

Feral animals and livestock certainly damage fragile environments. There are those who contend that such feral animals and livestock are part of the Australian "tradition". This association contends otherwise. It does not take many years for the breeding of such animals in the wild to alter a landscape for the worse. The proliferation of wild buffalo, goats and camels in northern and central Australia are extreme examples.

It is this Association's contention that community-based groups play a significant part in promoting and contributing towards ecotourism goals. Maintaining the health of wilderness areas and national parks is driven by community demand. Ecotourism cannot be sustained in degraded public lands resulting from poor promotion, management and funding. Guidelines set out by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

Category II areas – National Parks, are attached. Management of these areas needs to reflect these guidelines, and ecotourism needs to be carefully managed so that it doesn't impact adversely on sensitive, high conservation value areas. Bearing in mind this caveat, however, ecotourism can provide both revenue and public awareness and engagement that can play an important role in the management of high conservation value ecosystems and the restoration of more degraded ones.

c) The extent to which these activities contribute to the Region's economy.

Tourism is a competitive business. One only has to consider the attractions of Australia's coastlines and reefs to the domestic and international traveller to realise that the Region cannot take the tourist revenue for granted. Tourist destinations must be attractive and be promoted widely within the wider Australian communities.

Even within the Region the attractions of the NSW South Coast are a magnet not just for tourists and local residents but also for lifestyle changes on retirement. Nearer to Canberra, tourists will be attracted to national institutions and monuments within the city but beyond that the major inland tourist destination is the Snowy Mountains for summer and winter recreation.

The lesser tourist destinations must, to a significant extent, depend on the Region's own population centres for patrons. Thus intra-Regional ecotourism should be promoted and encouraged. The Region must make the effort to develop and promote its own tourist destinations and this includes wilderness areas, national parks and public lands of various types. Activities of various types and special events must be encouraged and promoted. There are niche markets out there like canoeing, bike riding and orienteering that bring in dollars.

This Association contends that a recreational facility such as the proposed Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park can be a focus of significant tourist potential and economic development. There are not too many widely recognised attractive recreational destinations around the major population centre of Canberra – Queanbeyan but the area of the proposed park is certainly one of them. However, such areas do need to be in public ownership to be a success and not under threat from encroaching private developments.

There are examples elsewhere around Australia. In Victoria the Shire Council around the Hanging Rock National Park operates the successfully with an entrance fee and gated car access. The Victorian parks service operates the Tower Hill National Park in a similar manner. The Queensland Government parks service operates at the internationally promoted Carnarvon Gorge National Park. And there are many other examples. A visit to New Zealand also provides many examples of industries associated with wilderness and national park areas and the significant value of the international visitor and backpacker dollar (helicopters, scenic flights, mini-bus tours, climbing schools, ski schools, rafting, cycle tours, wilderness camping, bungee jumping, etc).

However, it should again be emphasised that the primary value of a National Park (as an IUCN category II reserve) is for biodiversity conservation, rather than economic gain. Well-managed ecotourism, if compatible with protecting high conservation value areas and sensitive species, can generate significant revenue which will benefit society and can contribute to protecting and maintaining the natural values of the reserve, as well as providing opportunities for people to enjoy and gain appreciation of beautiful natural areas."

Ecotourism is an aspect of the general tourist industry that requires a sustained effort by National, State/Territory and Local Governments to create environments and landscapes that visitors will spend significant sums of money to experience. This Association believes the proposed Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park stands out as a potential popular intra-Region tourist destination with high conservation values that will greatly encourage associated private enterprises.

d) The industry self-regulation and government regulation, including, but not limited to, accreditation and licensing, which is most likely to incentivise ecotourism activities that assist in the protection and enhancement of the Region's ecosystems.

Governments at the National, State/Territory and Local levels are ultimately responsible for all land use. These governments cannot abrogate responsibility for the parks and landscapes that attract ecotourism enterprises. By its very nature ecotourism requires natural landscapes to be well managed and is difficult to imagine this happening when land is in private ownership and where public liability insurance is such a large recurring budget item. There must be buffer zones where developments are regulated. If this requires the buyback of private lands for the long term sustainability of national parks then the ways and means must be found to do this.

Governments must identify and set aside areas attractive to ecotourists and regulate the activities of those private enterprises using such areas and appropriate buffer zones. This does not mean that there cannot be market competition within such public lands but it does mean that operating licenses can be revoked for poor management of activities that have an adverse effect on landscapes and parks. Governments can also greatly help the promotion of ecotourist destinations nationally and internationally and with the provision of appropriate infrastructure.

e) The industry and government measures that are most likely to promote understanding of the biodiversity and other benefits of ecotourism organisations explicitly basing their processes and outcomes on principles of ecological sustainability.

As populations grow there will inevitably be pressures on land use. Wilderness areas and other public lands, once damaged can rarely be restored. Such areas must be identified and set aside in perpetuity for the all Australians communities near and far and for visitors from further afield now and in the future.

In the area of the proposed Murrumbidgee – Ginninderra Gorges National Park there are significant tracts of land that are completely unspoilt by rural industry land use even though they are owned privately. Only weed plants like blackberries and willows propagated by the Molonglo River are a serious problem in places. The biodiversity of the proposed national park has yet to be studied fully but there are hints of unique ecosystems. Connections with the Woodstock Nature Reserve in the ACT and the upstream Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River corridors should be closely monitored for urban discharges and pollutants.

Public education and promotion are vital elements of any long term management of landscapes and parks for future generations of Australians. All levels of Government and the tourist industry itself must promote a product that is attractive and sustainable in the long term. The management of public lands must be robust over the budget cycles of governments. Community organisations and ecotourism enterprises under strict guidelines should be encouraged and supported.

Members of the Association committee would welcome an opportunity to speak directly to the Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and Water on matters related to this inquiry. You may contact me by phone to propose a suitable time and place or else email Dr. Doug Finlayson at treasurer@ginninderra.org.au

Yours sincerely,

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President
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