

## **The Insidious Threat to Our National Parks**

**By**

**Eminent Australians**

Australian national parks are very special places. They contain the outstanding examples of our natural and cultural heritage remaining after the major settlement and development phases of our past.

Australia's first national park, Royal National Park south of Sydney, established in 1878, was the second in the world (the first being Yellowstone in the United States). Our national parks are recognised internationally by world authorities not only because of their diversity and quality of the natural systems they protect, but also because of the way they have been managed over the past 135 years.

Until now our national parks have been securely protected under state legislation, having been created after thorough scientific assessment and extensive comparative studies.

Why then is it now proposed to introduce uses into our parks that are inimical to the very reason for establishing them? National parks have not been set aside for grazing by cattle, logging, prospecting, hunting or commercial development. These activities, to be permitted in national parks in several states, are incompatible with the fundamental reasons for creating them - protecting our natural and cultural heritage. Such uses compromise and diminish the reasons for visiting national parks - to enjoy the beauty of natural landscapes and to relax in natural settings removed from the complexities and stresses of modern living.

The most insidious of these intrusive uses are the proposals of the Victorian government to lease areas within our national parks for up to 99 years to encourage commercial development by private corporations.

In reality, a 99-year lease transfers ownership of a public asset, something we all own and can share, to a private benefit enjoyed by a privileged few. Once the private sector develops resorts and associated infrastructure, the return of this land to the public will never occur. Thus, with long-term leasing provisions embedded in legislation as is now occurring through the National Parks Amendment (Leasing Powers and Other Matters) Bill, most land in our national parks is vulnerable, because leased areas can be readily expanded.

Indeed, the bill now before State Parliament makes clear that up to two-thirds of the land in our national parks could be placed under long-term leases. Of further concern is the provision that allows the decision to lease land in our national parks for 99 years to be made by the responsible minister. A 99-year lease would essentially remove land from the park and transfer tenure and management to the private sector. Currently, such an action can only occur by a decision of the Parliament to pass an amendment to the National Parks Act.

New resort development within national parks is now recognised internationally as undesirable and in conflict with the very things that national parks are established to protect.

Resort developments established in the 19th and early 20th centuries in Canada and the US by the railroad barons are today substantially constrained with only modernising and replacement now occurring.

Closer to home, the new visitor development and camping ground at Cradle Mountain National Park in Tasmania has been built outside the park, as is the Cradle Mountain Lodge. Recently, the calamitous Seal Rocks development at Phillip Island cost taxpayers \$55 million in compensation when the private development foundered. There was also the proposal, to the dismay of many, to develop a resort on the sand dunes of our much-loved national park at Wilsons Promontory. Such a possibility becomes increasingly probable with statutory provisions in the National Parks Act permitting leases of 99 years.

We cannot understand why the government would wish to pursue high-risk policies that threaten the security of our national parks when low-risk, attractive development could be encouraged in outstanding locations just outside our national parks.

Bill Borthwick, the Liberal MP who was Victoria's first minister for conservation, held grave fears about commercialising our national parks. In 1992 he said: "The Americans all know that they made that dreadful mistake years and years ago of allowing concessionaires in and taking over. I implore, whether it be Liberal or Labor government in the future, don't fall for the fast-buck concessionaires within national parks." His deeply felt concerns then are just as real today.

Government policy that starts the journey of incremental privatisation and commercialisation of national parks would be a betrayal of public trust.

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