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Speech to the Tourism and Transport Forum Leadership Summit 08 Canberra

Wednesday 17 September 2008

[CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY]

I want to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land, the Ngunnawal people; to custodians past and present.

Parliamentary colleagues, members of the Tourism and Transport Forum, ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure to be here today to discuss an area which holds a real interest and passion for me – Australia's natural, Indigenous, cultural and heritage assets.

Unquestionably we live in a unique country – from the fabulous desert oak landscapes of the Red Centre to the rugged and spectacular landscapes of the Tasmanian Wilderness; from tropical rainforests to vast clean beaches that stretch as far as the eye can see to our remarkable convict buildings and world class museums and galleries - the look, the sound, the smell of the bush.

So much of what makes us distinctive as a people – our openness and tenacity, our self sufficiency, our laconic sense of humour – springs from our natural landscapes, our cultural heritage and our historic relationships to the land.

It all plays a fundamental role in shaping our national identity.

Critically cultural and heritage tourism has been identified as the fastest growing tourism sector – a trend not just evidenced in Australia, but worldwide.

Its importance is clear. In 2007 the nature-based tourism sector contributed over \$25 billion to the Australian economy, and over 15 million people visited our parks and reserves.

National Landscapes

The TTF paper “National tourism infrastructure priorities” highlights the ‘National Landscapes’ program as an example of a successful policy model at work, identifying and promoting internationally compelling natural tourism destinations, and developing destination brand strategies and tourism master plans.

We are continuing the important job of protecting cultural and heritage places of outstanding value through the National and World Heritage Lists. Through our \$2.25 billion Caring for our Country Initiative, we are investing \$230 million in expanding the National Reserve System and Indigenous Protected Areas. This will mean more natural areas are protected and improved opportunities for regional eco-tourism.

But to support sustainable development of distinctive new experiences, the Australian Government, tourism industry and conservation sector must work together.

National Landscapes does just that, and I want to spend some time looking at the importance of this initiative.

National Landscapes will select and promote an elite set of distinctively Australian experiences. They will be marketed on the global stage to travellers of all ages who want to get off the beaten track and experience a contrast to their every day lives.

Eight National Landscapes have already been included in the program: Australia’s Red Centre, the Australian Alps, Australia’s Green Cauldron which stretches from Byron Bay to the Gold Coast and includes the world’s second largest shield volcano erosion crater and the World Heritage Listed Gondwana Rainforests of Australia.

The initiative also includes the Great Ocean Road, Flinders Ranges and Australia’s Coastal Wilderness - a wilderness area straddling the New South Wales and Victorian state border where warm temperate rainforests meet a pristine coastline.

It includes the Greater Blue Mountains and Kakadu, both also on the World and National Heritage List. These regions are set to develop an international profile which will attract high-yielding, long-stay visitors and focus the development of tourism infrastructure

National Landscapes will also support the conservation and protection of significant natural environments. Properly managing and taking care of our environmental and cultural assets can bring enormous long-term economic benefit to regions and the broader economy.

I had a chance to see this in action a few weeks ago when I revisited one of our National Landscapes.

Kakadu's landscapes are spectacular - 20,000 square kilometres of mangrove fringed tidal plains, wetlands and soaring sandstone cliffs. Teeming with wildlife in the water, on the land and in the air, the country displays a range and concentration of species seen nowhere else.

But it's the cultural experiences on offer at Kakadu that were the focus of my visit. Over the last three years Kakadu has reshaped itself as one of Australia's most rewarding cultural destinations, and it now offers a myriad of opportunities for visitors to connect with Aboriginal culture.

The change has been driven by a tourism vision that the Aboriginal-majority Board of Management set out in 2005. It's about traditional owners taking control of their tourism future in a way that is sustainable, meaningful and creates jobs for Aboriginal people on their own country.

Aboriginal people have started their own tourism operations to deliver cultural experiences. These businesses are perfectly aligned with the lucrative 'experience seeker' market – visitors who want to go beyond the stunning landscape and learn a bit about the Aboriginal people who live in the park and the way they see the world.

The Board, driven by the traditional owners, has developed a new brand for Kakadu, which flows through to a new logo, to new experiences, new uniforms and the entire working culture of the park.

New partnerships have been forged with Tourism NT and Tourism Top End to promote Kakadu to the Territory, Australia and the world.

Kakadu has also developed a tourism master plan to give certainty to the tourism industry.

Kakadu is an example of the type of sustainable economic opportunities that collaboration and tourism master planning can provide. So of course I welcome the suggestion from TTF that the Australian Alps be selected as a pilot project to deliver a tourism master plan which might be rolled out in other National Landscapes.

The Australian Alps includes some 1.6 million hectares of protected areas and a long history of cooperative management on a landscape scale.

I envisage that master planning will spell out cooperative management arrangements between the tourism industry, the conservation sector and government stakeholders. It will address issues that require regional planning, design or management solutions; commercial and investment opportunities;

quality assurance standards, visitor facilities, services, infrastructure, access and information needs.

I will be working closely with my colleague, Martin Ferguson, Minister for Tourism, to ensure that National Landscapes supports targeted infrastructure investment around our natural assets and provides a foundation for businesses, local, state and federal governments, national park authorities and non-government organisations to collaborate in developing quality experience-based products and infrastructure.

While we will continue our active engagement in the National Strategy, there are some sectors that I reckon require particular focus.

In particular I think there is great potential for the cultural and heritage tourism sector.

Cultural and heritage tourism

The TTF discussion paper “Driving tourism demand” presents a strong case for bringing cultural tourism to the forefront of Australia’s tourism strategic agenda.

Cultural and heritage tourism in Australia is enjoying the *largest annual growth out of any sector*. Cultural and heritage domestic and international visitors stay longer at their destination, travel further, and spend more than the average visitor.

This is a worldwide trend. According to the World Tourism Organisation, cultural tourism is growing in popularity faster than the rate of growth in tourism worldwide. And my Department’s own research into Australians’ understanding of heritage shows that interest in heritage related activities is incredibly strong.

Cultural and heritage tourism also has economic benefits for Australia. Visitation to Australia’s World Heritage areas, for example, contributes significantly to economic activity at a national, state and regional level. A recent study found that World heritage areas alone contributed over \$12 billion annually to the Australian economy, and employed over 120,000 people. The Australian Alps, a National Landscape and currently under assessment for National Heritage Listing, contributes around \$320 million a year to the tourism industry.

These figures should come as no surprise.

Heritage tourism

Many of Australia's stories are told through the 79 places that form Australia's National Heritage List. Seventeen places are also on the World Heritage List.

Some of these sites date back millions of years, yet many visitors remain unaware of their fascinating beginnings. The World-Heritage Listed Wet Tropics, for example, contains an almost complete record of the major stages in the evolution of plant life on earth.

Some are graced with extreme beauty, like the living cultural landscape of Kakadu National Park which I have spoken about, and the wilderness wonderland of the Greater Blue Mountains.

We have a rich Indigenous heritage that dates back some 40,000 years, with its compelling narrative of ingenuity, culture and rock art. On the volcanic plains of the Indigenous Protected Area Tyrendarra in Western Victoria is Budj Bim – a site of one of Australia's earliest and largest aquaculture ventures. The remains of eel traps and stone huts dating back 10,000 years can still be seen today.

And we have a remarkable historic heritage that chronicles settlement, federation and iconic 20th century architecture. The dark yet uplifting tales of our convict sites; the Royal Exhibition Building, the venue for the opening of the first Australian Federal Parliament in 1901; through to the human creative genius of the Sydney Opera House.

We are working hard to bring these stories alive, and entice people to visit.

If you flew here with Qantas, you may have seen our national heritage series on the in-flight entertainment, or read about one of our world or National Heritage sites in *Australian Way*. If you have recently been to Flemington Racecourse or the MCG, or gone bushwalking in the Warrumbungles you may have noticed our National Heritage List interpretive signage – a project we are rolling out around the country to help tourists appreciate and understand our rich heritage.

And we have formed a network of Indigenous, historic and natural place managers – the people who manage these tourism destinations.

Cultural tourism

We are also developing and supporting Australia's cultural tourism.

For example, the recent Turner to Monet exhibition at the National Gallery attracted over 180,000 visitors, of which around 72 per cent were from outside Canberra, injecting an estimated \$28 million into the ACT economy.

Similarly, the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, Australia's largest and most exciting international festival of contemporary art which finishes this month is on track to achieve record-breaking crowds of over 370,000 visitors.

Cultural tourism includes festivals and performances by our leading actors and musicians, and sporting events that go to the core of the collective Australian experience.

It includes regional festivals such as the Tamworth Country Music Festival, the Woodford Folk Festival in Queensland and the National Folk Festival here in Canberra, all of which also attract significant visitor numbers.

And there are local community festivals. Many of these have a high level of creativity, or offer distinct themes such as the Alice Desert Festival, the Bundaleer Weekend at Jamestown in South Australia, or Queensland's Julia Creek Dirt & Dust Festival. They all offer opportunities for tourism development.

We recognise that many visitors are attracted by the rich and dynamic cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

As a demonstration of its commitment to supporting Indigenous arts and culture, the Rudd Government has committed to increasing investment in the Indigenous visual arts sector by \$7.6 million over four years. This additional funding will support the increased sustainability of Indigenous art centres and other key support organisations.

We also understand the tourist market is a real and increasingly important market for Indigenous visual arts and craft. It can help sustain Indigenous culture and provide opportunities for enhancing Indigenous economic development.

So I welcome the suggestion of a joint industry-government taskforce to provide advice on heritage and cultural tourism to the National Long-Term Tourism Strategy Steering Committee. I will make my Department's contribution a priority, as I see this taskforce as an important forum for collaboration.

Conclusion

We have before us an extraordinary opportunity.

It means driving economic opportunities to local communities, and ensuring our natural, cultural and historic heritage places benefit from tourism in a way that makes them more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Capturing this opportunity will require a commitment not just for the present but on behalf of posterity.

But getting it right will require true partnerships.

I have outlined what the Rudd Government brings to the table.

I invite you to come on a journey with the Australian Government to develop the potential of our world-class natural, cultural and historic heritage tourism offering.

Thank you.

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