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Tour Operator Says Housing Development Will Stop International Tourism.

International wildlife tour operator, Echidna Walkabout, has called on the Victorian Minister for Planning, Matthew Guy, to override a decision by the City of Greater Geelong to allow a large housing development on farmland opposite Serendip Sanctuary, a significant Parks Victoria wildlife reserve on the outskirts of Lara (near Geelong).

“We told Mr Guy that the City of Greater Geelong Council has completely ignored the impacts of a major housing development on international tourism into the Geelong region,” said Roger Smith, Operations Director of Echidna Walkabout. “Council had this proposal before it for 8 years yet, surprisingly, they never sought our opinion, which begs the question: did they want to hear from us and, if not, why not?”

“This is a major oversight which ignores the significant impacts such a large development will have on the delicate balance of wildlife in the Sanctuary and, therefore, on the tourism industry”, Mr Smith said. “In our letter to Mr Guy we stated that wildlife tours will cease if the development proceeds. International visitors come to Australia to see our unique wildlife in the wild. They don't want to look at stressed wildlife next to a noisy housing development. We will be forced out of Serendip and will take our business, our investments and our employment opportunities out of the region.”

Echidna Walkabout has taken tens of thousands of international visitors to Serendip Sanctuary.

“We are recognised as being at the cutting edge of nature-based tourism in Australia,” Mr Smith said, “Twenty years experience tells us that the housing development will be the death knell of Serendip Sanctuary as a serious contender in the international tourism business.”

“Tourism businesses from all over the globe send people to Serendip to do our tour. They recognise Serendip as equal to many of Australia's major iconic destinations. They won't be happy if they hear that the serenity of Serendip may be shattered by a housing development.” said Mr Smith. “At a time when international tourism into Australia is declining, this ridiculous affair is a significant embarrassment to the Australian inbound travel industry.”

“Everyone is opposed to this development, from the citizens of Lara all the way through to our international suppliers. It must be stopped dead in its tracks, right now, before any more damage is done. Act now Minister Guy, the world is watching and waiting.” said Mr Smith. **ENDS**

Attached: Letter to Minister Guy - for list of 76 tour companies using Serendip see last page.



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18th August 2011

Hon. Matthew Guy
Minister for Planning
Victorian Government

Dear Mr Guy,

**RE: C73 Planning Amendment
Request to urgently consider the Impact on International Wildlife Tourism of
Proposed housing development at Caddys Road, Lara**

It has come to our attention that you are considering a Planning Amendment recommended by the City of Greater Geelong (CoGG) for a housing development around Caddys Road on the northern edge of the town of Lara.

The purpose of this letter is to draw your attention to an important matter that has not been considered thus far in this amendment – ie. the vital importance of Serendip Sanctuary to the international tourism industry. The intensive development proposed by the C73 amendment would have a catastrophic impact on international wildlife tourism at Serendip. **This is a very serious matter that appears to have been completely overlooked by the CoGG in its deliberations on the amendment and one that is of such significance that it should cause the amendment to be shelved in favour of a less intensive proposal.**

As an eco-tourism operator we have been operating wildlife tours for international tourists into Serendip Sanctuary for 18 years. In that time our tours have taken many thousands of visitors to the Sanctuary. We have also built up a solid international market-base that includes travel agencies from all corners of the world. The main feature that they all recognise is the surprisingly “wild” nature of Serendip in a location so close to a capital city (ie Melbourne – Serendip is the closest open-range sanctuary to any major Australian capital city). Due to our efforts Serendip is now known across the globe and recognised by the international travel industry as one of the best places in Australia to see genuine Australian wildlife in the wild. This is a remarkable achievement and one that is not recognised by the CoGG.

In our opinion Serendip deserves recognition as a national wildlife icon – it contains some of the best wildlife viewing opportunities in Australia. There is nowhere else in the country where people can be guided, up close, to wild kangaroos and emus whilst viewing rare and endangered birdlife in an open-range environment. This place has international equivalents in Africa and can match the very best Australia has to offer.

Unfortunately Serendip is also vastly under-rated by the agencies that overlook it – we are not aware if Parks Victoria ever raised the matter of wildlife tourism with CoGG! This may have been the reason

why we were not aware of the full impact of the proposal at Caddys Road until very recently. Having now looked at much of the documentation and evidence provided to the CoGG, we are surprised that:

- a) the amendment fails to consider the impacts on nature based tourism at Serendip
- b) as a principle user of Serendip we were not approached to provide information about the impacts on tourism of the development.

These are major oversights and could be considered, at the very least, negligent and, at the worst, as serving the purposes of the proponents of the development. There can be no doubting that the existence of international tourism operations at Serendip were known to some of the people who were approached by the CoGG – including Parks Victoria staff. *The fact that no consideration whatsoever was given to this aspect of the amendment is staggering.* Whatever the case, we feel that these issues must be considered carefully and thoroughly before any final decisions on the amendment are made.

Impacts of the Proposed Development on Wildlife at Serendip

Having organised and guided wildlife tours across Australia and at Serendip for 18 years, we have a thorough understanding of the impact of any outside influences on the movements and actions of the wildlife at Serendip. Many people are not aware that Serendip contains a large number of free ranging (not in cages or enclosures of any kind) kangaroos, emus and many other animals. The style of our touring is to take people walking close to these the animals in the wild.

In the interests of brevity we will use one of the many animals at Serendip as an example of potential impacts - the following applies to most of the wildlife in the Sanctuary:

Kangaroos, in particular, have extremely highly developed senses. Anyone who has attempted to approach a wild kangaroo will appreciate that their hearing and sight are acutely tuned to any disturbance. The Eastern-grey kangaroos at Serendip are extremely wary of human activity of any kind and they will take flight at almost any disturbance. Our guides are trained to deal with this timidity so we have managed, over many years, to work out ways of approaching these animals without them running away. These skills are appreciated by our guests and have allowed us to showcase the great iconic animal of Australia – the kangaroo – to many thousands of international visitors.

Both of Serendip's large southern grasslands - that we use for wildlife viewing – abut Windemere Road and are directly opposite the proposed new development. We are aware that a buffer zone is proposed for the Windemere Road boundary of the new development with Serendip but this buffer will NOT contain the noise or activities of a major housing estate in either the construction phase or the occupancy phase of the development. Nor is the buffer in existence – it will need to be built and planted out and the vegetation allowed to grow to maturity before it actually acts as a buffer. This may take many years and in the mean time the wildlife will have already suffered shock from the new development and will have left the sanctuary.

Why is Serendip a significant reserve to Wildlife Tourism in Australia

There is a very simple “formula” to explain why Serendip is important – follow the dots:-

- Australia is famous for its unique wildlife,
- One of the primary reasons international visitors come to Australia is to see our wildlife,
- Melbourne is the second largest international hub in Australia.
- Serendip is the closest free-ranging reserve to Melbourne where visitors can see wild kangaroos and other unique Australian wildlife.
- Interestingly a nearby park – the You Yangs – is the closest place that they can see wild koalas.
- Both these locations are the closest free-ranging wildlife reserves to any capital city in Australia and they contain our 2 most iconic species

- In the past 18 years we have taken many thousands of people to Serendip (and on to the You Yangs) – many of them only spend one day in Melbourne and Serendip is the primary reason they came to our city

Thus it can be seen that Serendip is a very significant drawcard for international visitors and plays an important role in bringing people to Melbourne and the Geelong region. Its significance has been understated for many years but our extended usage of the Sanctuary proves it can no longer be ignored as an iconic destination for visitors to Victoria.

The International Tourism Industry's relationship with Serendip

Echidna Walkabout has played a major role in promoting Serendip to the world through our tour: **Savannah Walkabout – Kangaroos & Koalas in the Wild.** This tour is now known in many formats throughout the world. It is used by many international tourism agencies including the rapidly expanding Cruise Ship market.

We have attached a list of 76 travel companies that sell the Savannah Walkabout – these companies ALL deal in the international market and include some of the largest travel companies in the world eg.

- most international cruise lines
- most Australian Inbound travel companies
- wholesale and retail travel agencies in North America
- travel wholesalers throughout Europe, UK and Scandinavia
- a growing number of Conference, Incentive and Corporate clients

Discussion – wildlife tourism will cease if Caddys Rd proposal proceeds

Our credentials in our sector of the tourism industry are recognised by both **Tourism Australia** and **Tourism Victoria**. We are at the leading edge of wildlife and nature-based tourism in Australia. We carry out our own marketing, travelling the world regularly to sell our products into the international market so we know this market intimately.

Our combined knowledge of the travel industry and wildlife tourism is extensive. With 18 years experience behind us we can say - with some certainty - that the proposed development at Caddys Road at Lara will have a catastrophic impact on wildlife viewing options at Serendip. The number of species of birds and animals at Serendip will reduce as a result of intensive development and the entire nature of the Sanctuary as a refuge for wildlife will rapidly dissipate and degrade.

It is a recognised fact that increased human activity impacts heavily on indigenous wildlife. The apparent increase in population of the Caddys Rd development would be approximately 1500 to 2000 people. The increased human activity in and around Serendip would certainly curtail wildlife movements and activity. There would also be a dramatic increase in non-indigenous animals such as cats and dogs (and other pets) which would have a major impact on the wildlife at Serendip – dogs are already a serious pest species at Serendip.

Serendip is not a large area – it is a little over 2.5 square kilometres and it has no real buffers where wildlife can take refuge from intensive development. Serendip is a haven in this largely modified environment. It has a long history of caring for and researching wildlife which has enabled it to develop into a learning and tourism centre. It has been re-vegetated to provide quality habitat and has a large wetland which is a major draw-card for birds from throughout southern Australia. This process has taken many years and has been highly successful. It is ridiculous to believe that a major housing development will not impact on all this work. It is also silly to imagine that the wildlife will have other places to go – there is, quite simply, nowhere else to go.

Recommendations

1. The Caddys Rd development (Amendment C73), as it currently stands, should be not proceed.
2. Any development of the farmlands/open grasslands to the south of Serendip should be in broad hectare divisions with very low impact, low rise housing.
3. If broad hectare development proceeds a buffer of at least 50 metres must be provided. This buffer would take out 50 metres of land to be developed. The buffer should be planted out with dense, layered native vegetation that would provide a complete visual barrier between Serendip and the developed land. This buffer should be created and planted well in *advance* of any development.
4. Serendip itself should be rezoned as a major wildlife reserve to protect its wildlife in perpetuity.
5. The value of Serendip as a major destination for international travellers must be recognised – especially its unique role as a destination to see Australian wildlife roaming freely in the wild and thus to provide jobs and income to the travel industry not only in the Greater Geelong area but also in Melbourne and beyond
6. Parks Victoria must play a much greater role in the promotion of Serendip as an international travel destination by recognising its huge potential as a major wildlife destination.
7. The Government of Victoria through Tourism Victoria should consider raising the status of Serendip Sanctuary by supporting the notion that it has the potential to become a national wildlife icon. (As surprising as this may sound - we have known many visitors to Serendip to say that it is the very best experience they have had in Australia – after visiting Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef, the Great Ocean Road etc)

Conclusion

Serendip Sanctuary has made thousands of people's dreams come true. They travel across the world, spending thousands of dollars, to get to this incredible place where they finally find what has brought them to Australia: a real and defining experience with our unique native animals in a beautiful, peaceful and unique place. As a result many people are employed to provide services to these travellers.

The development at Caddys Road, as it is currently proposed, will mean the end of Serendip as know it. Much of the wildlife will be forced to dramatically modify its activities. The kangaroo population at Serendip will spend most of its time stressed and hiding from people and will probably end up attempting to move out to become road kill. The aesthetics of the sanctuary - with its broad open views in all directions - will be modified by a large housing development. The noise of construction and vehicles will increase dramatically *and will remain in other forms after the development is completed.*

Simply stated : Wildlife tourism will cease. No-one wants to look at stressed wildlife next to a housing development. Echidna Walkabout will no longer support the Sanctuary. We will be forced to move our business elsewhere.

The Caddys Road amendment would destroy Serendip, stop tourism to the area and generally turn one of Australia's most important wildlife destinations into a public park.

We are stunned that this issue has NOT been tackled by the CoGG in any of its deliberations before the council accepted the C73 amendment.

On this basis alone the C73 Amendment must NOT be approved.

Your sincerely



Roger Smith – Director Operations, Echidna Walkabout
Mobile: 0427 808 745

Attachment

International Travel Agencies that use Serendip Sanctuary

Below is a list of 76 travel organisations that book tours with Echidna Walkabout for clients that travel to Serendip Sanctuary. These agencies include some of the biggest in the world and Australia. Major players and the larger agencies are listed as red. There are other companies that we cannot list for corporate confidentiality reasons.

INTERNATIONAL (OFF SHORE)

Abel Tasman USA
Australie Autrement FRANCE
Australie Tours FRANCE
Barron Travel NETHERLANDS
Best of Travel Group EUROPE
Boomerang Reisen GERMANY
Coco Weltweit AUSTRIA
Down Under Answers USA
Downunder Travel CANADA
Dreamtime SWITZERLAND
Explorer Fernreisen GERMANY
Exploritas/Elderhostel USA
FDM Travel DENMARK
Flextravel TUI SWITZERLAND
Gold Medal UK
Goway CANADA
Great Expeditions USA
Journeys International USA
Knecht Reisen SWITZERLAND
Marco Polo DENMARK
Mongol Global USA
MyPlanet DENMARK
MyPlanet SWEDEN
NatureTrek UK
Nyhavn Rejser DENMARK
Ozeania Reisehaus SWITZERLAND
Pacific Island Travel NETHERLANDS
Qantas Vacations USA
Risskov Travel Partner DENMARK
Skytours Hotelplan SWITZERLAND
Springboard Vacations USA
Stella US
Swain Australia
Tailor Made Travel UK
Tasman Travel NETHERLANDS
Team Bennis DENMARK
Travel 2 USA
Uniquely New Zealand (& Australia)
Walkabout NETHERLANDS
Worldwide Tours Naar ITALY

CRUISE SHIPPING LINES

Princess Cruises (P&O)
Holland America Line
Royal Caribbean
Celebrity Cruises
Costa Cruises
Silversea Cruises
Oceania Cruises

INBOUND (ON SHORE)

Abercrombie & Kent
AOT Group
Australia One
Australia 2 See
Anzcro Australia
Beehive Tours
Best of Australia Travel Centres
Bob Wood SPT
DesigNZ on Travel
Diverse Travel
Downunder Destinations
Finesse
General Travel
Goway Australia
Inala Australia
Intrepid Travel
KN-Travel Australia
Pacific Spirit
Pan Pacific
Qantas Australia
Southern Crossings
Southern World Vacations
Swain Tours USA
Terra Nova Tours
Tours To Go
Viator
WEL-TRAVEL

CONFERENCE & MEETING ORGANISERS

Arinex
Australian Tours Management
JCM Destinations
The Conference Connection