

National parks aren't your personal playground

By Peter Lawrence

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Photo: Interest groups are eyeing off our national parks and asking: "What's in it for me?" (ABC News)

Interest groups are putting themselves ahead of the environment with a "me first" attitude that is gaining political clout and putting our parks at risk, writes Peter Lawrence.

We seem to be living in an age where the natural environment and, in particular, our national parks, are under increasing pressure from WIIFM. What's WIIFM, you ask? "What's in it for me?".

No longer are national parks primarily there to preserve and protect our country's precious natural heritage but now they must be the venue for a vast array of potentially harmful activities.

Single-issue political parties, some recreationalists and commercial interests are mounting concerted campaigns to promote the WIIFM ideal. These campaigns seem to have at their core the presumption that our protected public land is there for their own individual use as they see fit and it is "un-Australian" to suggest otherwise.

Despite what appears to be the ever increasing diversity of WIIFM supporters that includes some members of the more radical recreational groups of four-wheel drivers, motorcycle riders, prospectors, hunters and fishermen, they often seem to be using very similar words. We regularly hear: "We have a right to do as we please in our parks and we need to unlock these areas for all to use." It seems both state and federal governments agree with some of this rhetoric as we are witnessing the lowering of the protection standards across our park systems to accommodate some of their demands.

The WIIFM ideal is not just the domain of the recreationalists, as we are increasingly seeing areas under threat from commercial interests such as logging, mining and commercial fishing. These groups are generally motivated by the need to make a profit, but once again, at its core are the personal interest of the company managers and the shareholders.

Their rhetoric is different to the first group. We often hear: "We have to provide jobs in rural areas and we need to grow the economy if Australia is to survive in the global

economy." The techniques used may be more sophisticated than the recreationalists as they often have the financial clout and the political connections needed to convince governments to agree to their demands. One need not look far to see this in action. The [decision](#) to allow the dumping of dredge spoil, from harbour extensions for the coal industry, in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is a prime example.

There are even groups who seem to sit somewhere between the recreationalists and the business enterprises. The most obvious members of this group, who are prominent at the moment, are the Victorian mountain cattlemen who openly trade on their presumed right to use the Alpine National Park as part of their ability to run a profitable farming enterprise.

Obviously there is a huge difference in the potential impacts between some of the activities I have mentioned, but what is most concerning is the attitude all these groups often share: national parks are there for us to use as we see fit.

Well no, actually, this is a distortion of the facts and simply not true. Our National Parks are there first and foremost for the preservation of the natural environment both biotic and abiotic (living and non-living).

The Victorian [National Parks Act](#), for example, is explicitly clear on why we have the parks:

The objects of Victorian National Parks Act ... is for the preservation and protection of the natural environment... for the protection and preservation of indigenous flora and fauna and of features of scenic, archaeological, ecological, geological, historic or other scientific interest in those park and ... to make provision in accordance with the foregoing for the use of parks by the public for the purposes of enjoyment, recreation or education and for the encouragement and control of that use.

It is important to note that recreation and other activities are permitted and encouraged in national parks but not if those activities negatively impact on the areas environmental values.

We need our national parks more than ever at the moment. We need them as refuges for our staggeringly diverse ecosystems with their assemblages of plants, animals and other living organisms. We need them to provide us with the "ecosystem services" like clean air and fresh water and we need them to provide us with places to go to learn something about how all living things, including us, are connected on this fragile planet.

Ultimately, whether some of us like it or not our future as human beings on this planet is intimately connected to how we treat the land and its non-human inhabitants – we are all in this together.

Peter Lawrence is an environmentalist and a recently retired Victorian protected public land officer who has managed national parks and reserves for more than 35 years.