

**ECONOMICS AND INDUSTRY
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION, USE AND REGULATION OF CARAVAN
PARKS (AND CAMPING GROUNDS) IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE TAKEN
AT PERTH
FRIDAY, 24 JULY 2009**

SESSION ONE

Members

**Dr M.D. Nahan (Chairman)
Mr W.J. Johnston (Deputy Chairman)
Mr M.P. Murray
Mrs L.M. Harvey
Mr J.E. McGrath**

Mr D.A. Templeman (Co-opted member)

Hearing commenced at 1.21 pm

SHARP, MR PETER

**Director, Parks and Visitor Services, Department of Environment and Conservation,
examined:**

SHEA, MS TRACY

**Acting Assistant Director, Policy and Planning, Department of Environment and
Conservation,
examined:**

The CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee I would like to thank you for your interest and your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into caravanning and camping. You have been provided with a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference.

The Economics and Industry Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. This hearing is a formal procedure of Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house. Even though the committee is not asking witnesses to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament.

This is a public hearing and Hansard will be making transcripts of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any document during your evidence, it would assist Hansard if you would provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed to the questions we have for you today, I need to ask you a series of questions. Have you completed the "Details of Witness" form?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form today?

The Witnesses: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you have any questions in relation to being a witness at today's hearing?

The Witnesses: No.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your submission to this inquiry. Together with the information you provide today, your submission will form part of the evidence to this inquiry and may be made public. Are there any amendments to your submission?

Mr Sharp: No.

The CHAIRMAN: We have a series of questions to ask you today, but before we do, do you wish to provide the committee with any additional information and make an opening statement to the hearing?

Mr Sharp: No.

The CHAIRMAN: We have spent some of our time going around to various caravan parks in the north and we have just come back from the south west. One of the issues that arise sometimes is the relationship between DEC and caravan parks. In particular, there are two aspects of it. One is competitive neutrality and DEC competing with caravan parks. That was raised only at Manjimup, and that is where Manjimup does not have a heavily used caravan park. The second is that where it is more in demand, there is greater provision by DEC of caravan parks of various types and the scope for that and the nature; that is, if you did them, what would they be and what are some of the impediments? Do you have any comments?

Mr Sharp: With regard to the caravan parks, I think in our submission to the committee, Mr Chairman, we indicated that we have got a number of caravan parks scattered around the state, ranging from Karijini down to Walpole and Nornalup, including caravan parks on various tenures of land that we are responsible for managing. Our operation of caravan parks is generally undertaken by way of some sort of commercial concession to the private sector by way of a lease. Those operators would then run a caravan parks on a commercial basis and pay us an agreed lease fee as compensation for the use of the estate that we have got. The competitive neutrality issue has not been raised with me previously as a major concern. Certainly, there has been a concern expressed to us previously that generally the caravan and camping industry has been squeezed out of a lot of locations. There have been suggestions that perhaps the estate that we are responsible for managing around Western Australia may provide opportunities for the industry to take up placement. That suggestion is something that we would have to consider in light of the purpose of the reserves that we are responsible for managing and whether it would be consistent with a management plan that we are responsible for preparing for each of the parks and reserves that we manage. Nevertheless, I think that there is opportunity for our department to broaden the range of opportunities available for people to engage in caravanning and camping activity around Western Australia. They do caravanning and camping in a number of places that we are responsible for managing that are also not regarded as formal caravan parks. There are a lot of people who go off road and they have off-road caravans and they camp there.

The CHAIRMAN: Like Shannon?

Mr Sharp: Yes, and Purnululu and other places.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Mr Sharp, have you got any recent examples of areas that DEC controls that have been opened up for additional caravanning or camping opportunities?

Mr Sharp: I think the most recent example we would have would be Dwellingup, where we opened up a caravan park there as a response to the closure of the timber mill in Dwellingup town site. That would be 15 years go, I think. That would be the most recent time.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Through you, Mr Chair. The Chair mentioned in his preliminary remarks impediments for the department in terms of making areas that DEC currently controls more accessible. Obviously, there are management plan and policy issues and possibly resource issues. If you were to open up further areas in the south west, for example, what would that mean from the department's perspective? What would have to be satisfied from the department's perspective to allow that to happen?

Mr Sharp: I think we would have to have a look at the tenure of the land. If the land is nature reserve, state forest, conservation park or national park, it would have a different range of policies and impediments towards achieving such an outcome. In general terms, if we were to look at locating a facility such as this in state forest, it would be easier to achieve than it would be in those other tenures of land. If we were to look at opening it up in conservation park, it would be slightly harder than in state forest but easier than in a national park. It could be done in national park if it were consistent with the provisions of a management plan. It would be generally inconsistent with the purposes of nature reserves.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: If that were to happen and if you were to identify an area, is there a resource cost? Does it mean additional park rangers et cetera are required or could you do it through your Campground Host program?

Mr Sharp: Generally, we would have to look at the sites. We would give consideration to what the requirements are for the development of the sites. If you are developing caravan parks, they are pretty expensive actually in terms of putting in an infrastructure and satisfying the requirements of health regulations and other town planning requirements that might be affected. In some of our estate we are not too badly impacted, but the closer you get to a more urbanised part of the state, the harder it is to do a lot of these things, and you would want to ensure that whatever we did was not going to be detrimental to existing caravan park operators and town planning schemes and things that local governments were applying.

The CHAIRMAN: Just further on that, if this committee were to suggest that DEC identify some areas, particularly in the south west, where they could develop over a period of time those sites, would you be able to do that and give some priority to where you would look and where you would think about sites, because some of the sites at Hamelin Bay that we visited are first rate, and there are not too many other available sites in that area? We did not see the coalmine, because it rained at that time and it was also dark. Particularly in the south west, there is simply not very much alternative space where we can identify any other area except for DEC land of various types.

Mr Sharp: I think we could actually go through that approach and do that. In doing so, if the forest management plan or the various national parks management plans had provision in there to accommodate that sort of use, then we would go through a process of then proceeding to see what are the business fundamentals that need to be addressed. In the case of Hamelin Bay, for example, that you have already cited, that is a longstanding caravan park, which goes back to the 1950s. It was very run down, so we decided it needed an injection of capital.

[1.30 pm]

The CHAIRMAN: It is an old town site, is it not?

Mr Sharp: Yes. It needed the injection. We went out to the marketplace and got private sector investment, and that has lifted it up to standard. Some further development will take place there. We have issued a lease for the term of 21 years with an option of a further 21 years. We consider those to be business models, because if we were going down the path of more formal caravan parks, we would be better off with the private sector operating them. We would put together a package that would allocate a suitable area with a suitable lease term, which would be developed on the basis of a business plan. The term of the lease would be determined by the amount of the investment and other considerations associated with the site. I am not aware that we have a wide range of suitable locations for caravan parks around the south coast or in the south west. Having said that, I do not think that we have actively looked with that in mind. Until we have looked with that in mind, that is a pretty hard question to answer.

The CHAIRMAN: The Western Australian Tourism Commission is doing that. I am not sure if it is looking at crown land solely or at Department of Environment and Conservation land. Given the difficulties of finding additional sites—that is the feedback we are getting—DEC land in the south west is probably the area we would have to look at, when looking at replacing lost sites. DEC keeps coming up.

Mr Sharp: Yes, and that is because we manage a large tract of land.

The CHAIRMAN: And in places where people want to go by design.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: In your submission—I must say that I was surprised at how brief it was—you do not really spend any time talking about camping. This is an inquiry into caravanning and camping. Do you have anything that you would like to add regarding camping? For example, how

many people go to your parks to camp in any given year? Do you keep those sorts of demand statistics?

Mr Sharp: Yes, we do keep those statistics. Tracey, you might have a better handle on the statistics for camping per se. With regard to camping, we did not actually think that that was an issue that would cause concern for this committee. When we read the terms of reference, we saw clearly that this committee was trying to address the issues arising from the displacement of caravan parks that have been scattered around the state over a period of time. I apologise if we have put that emphasis on our submission.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: One of the things we have found, of course, is that now caravans are becoming very self-contained and the old approach of caravanners going to caravan parks, whilst it has not ended, is not the focus of a lot of people who use caravans. That is why the impact of caravans is really so small now. You say here that people use caravans in your campsites. If you have a large number of campsites, and the demand for campsites is less than their usage, that would suggest that there is an opportunity for the promotion of those sites for self-contained caravans. Do you see what I mean? There is no understanding from your submission about any of those types of issues. The statistics you were about to give would be very useful.

Ms Shea: We have over 12 million visits per year to the estate that DEC manages, and about 140 different camping areas. I am not aware of any statistics that we have about how many of our 12 million visits would be for camping. We could get you that information.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Dwellingup is an example of where an overnight fee is charged, and that would be recorded. I suppose you would have those sorts of statistics would you not? In the Dwellingup catchment, over a period of 12 months, there are X number of visitors, because we collect X amount of fees from that area. Maybe we could make a request to the department to provide a breakdown of that. It will be very useful for us to know.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Where are your 140 camping sites geographically located? Are they mostly in the south west? Are they mostly in the north? How do people get to them? What is their usage? Do you charge a fee for using them? Are the services provided fairly small and not very extensive at all in terms of the infrastructure provided? We hear from caravanners that those are the sorts of spots they are looking for. What opportunity is there for ensuring that the infrastructure will be able to cope with those vans? Is there a demand? Are your 140 sites regularly full? Not having that sort of information means that we are not able to complete our inquiry to the extent that we would like to.

Mr Sharp: In response to your question, Mr Johnston, the Cape Range National Park, for example, has a suite of camping areas. We do not accommodate caravans regularly going in there. We actually have camp ground hosts who meet and greet the visitors, and they reside in caravans on the side, but generally they are there to act as our ambassadors for people who go camping. That occurs in a range of our national parks, such as Purnululu and various other parks and reserves. Depending on the management plan, sometimes people are allowed to go in with camper trailers. Sometimes they can go in with caravans, and sometimes they cannot. Purnululu, for example, in its management plan, prohibits caravans going into the park because of the problems associated with the access into that park. It is a pretty tough haul into that park; it is four-wheel drive access only. We have had occasions when large vans have been hooked up, because they have to go through river crossings and things, which can cause quite a bit of damage.

Nevertheless, there is always an opportunity for us to look at where the market is and where the demands are and, if necessary, put proposals to the government to either amend the management plan if it does not allow for it, or, if we do not have a management plan applying to an area, to go through a process we call the compatible operations provision under the Conservation and Land Management Act. We can go through a mini-management plan process, in which we put a proposal out to the public and get comment on it. The proposal might be to establish a caravan park in a

particular area. The minister can then take on board all those comments and the advice of the vesting authority, which would be the Conservation Commission, and make a determination whether to approve such a development. There are ways and mechanisms within the CALM act for us to address that.

With regard to camping, I think that we have focused mainly on the camping end of the spectrum. We have been very cognisant that a lot of caravan parks are run as business enterprises, and we do not want to be seen to be coming in and competing head to head with business enterprises in nearby towns. For example, if we talk about the Cape Range National Park, we would not see that it is appropriate to put a caravan park at that national park, when caravanners can actually go to the Yardie Creek homestead, which is to the northern end of the Cape Range, or into the township of Exmouth and do a daily commute. We are very cognisant of those sorts of issues, but there is no fixed policy as such.

The CHAIRMAN: One of the issues Mr Johnston raised is that caravan parks are not all the same. There is an increasing trend for people to want eco-parks with fewer services. As you go down to the areas with fewer services, the private sector has a hard time affording these things and recouping the costs. Everywhere we go, we get this feedback. It appears to us that we need planning that includes the whole spectrum, from the traditional family-based caravan park with the mini-golf course through to camping, and in between—eco-parks and other things. In the south west particularly—the north is much more sparsely populated—that does not appear to be happening. What I gather from you is that DEC has not sat down with the Department of Planning and other departments such as tourism to formulate an overall plan for the availability of camping and caravanning services.

Mr Sharp: That is correct. We have not done that. It is certainly something we could do. It would probably be timely and of assistance to the broader community and the industry if that were done, so if it is a recommendation the committee would like to make, we would be happy to see it come out.

[1.45 pm]

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I would not be surprised if most of DEC's 140 camping grounds were suitable for these self-contained vans. You would probably find, if you asked the people responsible, that 20 or 30 per cent of campers are now in vans.

Ms Shea: This is the trend, and we have found that the Britz-type campervans are much more prevalent than previously, and we have undertaken to redesign many of our camp sites to facilitate larger vehicles and the other infrastructure that goes with them.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: The issue of illegal camping in roadside rest areas and those sorts of places has been brought up on a number of occasions. Obviously, the department has fee-for-service camp sites. What is the incidence of illegal camping? Does the department record infringements and the number of incidents of illegal camping in DEC-run sites—that is, people who are camping but not paying the fee or people camping in the wrong area?

Mr Sharp: Yes, we do have instances of illegal camping. Where we develop a campground, we have an expectation that people will pay their fees. Generally, unless we are manning the sites and collecting the fees, we run on an honesty box system. We have a system by which people can get an envelope and attach a tag to their tent, which indicates they have paid their fee. If there is no tag on a tent, our ranger or campground host would come by and remind them that they need to pay a fee. Those fees are prescribed under our regulations, and they apply at all declared camping grounds. There is the ability for people to go camping in more remote locations, as long as that is an activity that is accommodated in those areas. That is so that people can go bushwalking and those sorts of activities.

One of the issues we face with people moving around with self-contained camper vans and the off-road vehicle caravans is the disposal of waste. They are self-contained because they have toilets and things, and sometimes they dump a lot of that stuff into our toilet systems and kill off all the bacteria we have got working there. That is an issue that I think is being faced not only by our agency but by local government authorities et cetera. There is a practice in some towns of actually having effluent disposal points where people are encouraged to dispose of their waste. Those are really the only major issues for the department. We do not have an overarching concern about non-compliance. We are not witnessing that. We have found that most people who go to our sites and camp and caravan and stay in the natural areas are more than willing to pay the fee that we apply because they understand that the fees we collect are reinvested into the management of the resource and are not being taken away to go into Treasury's pocket, for example.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Further to that, with the illegal dumping into your organic toilets—for want of a better word, as I am not sure what you call the systems DEC has in place—do you have any data on or record of how frequently that might be occurring in your sites?

Mr Sharp: I could inquire with some of our ranger staff and district managers. It has been a problem for DEC on the Mitchell Plateau and a few other locations around the state, particularly in remote areas, where we put in these pretty high-tech systems. They are a hybrid system; but the addition of chemicals stops the composting processes. When we have a site where a lot of people are camping but there are few facilities, the system backs up and the site becomes pretty ugly pretty quickly. I think councils have found that as well.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Is DEC considering putting in chemical waste dump points?

Mr Sharp: I have indicated to various local governments in the past that that might well be something DEC would contribute to, even if it were not on the CALM estate. If we have people going onto the CALM estate through the town, then I am not averse to a suggestion that some form of contribution be made if I can see that will be a direct benefit to us. Somehow I would have to weigh that up. I do not know how I will quantify that, but it is not an unreasonable thing for us to do. We should be working in partnership.

The CHAIRMAN: We have heard of petrol stations in certain places offering those facilities. It might be good for the shire and all those people to get together. A petrol station looks like a good spot for it.

Mr Sharp: I think that Main Roads has a number of these sorts of facilities.

The CHAIRMAN: Very few.

Mr Sharp: Do they?

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: They are very remote, generally.

Mr Sharp: Okay.

The CHAIRMAN: The committee understands that the department's nature-based parks are not subject to the same standards as caravan parks, which are regulated under the Caravan Parks and Camping Grounds Act 1995, but are governed by the CALM act. How are they different, and how are the nature-based parks regulated?

Mr Sharp: The main difference here is the application of the provisions of the health regulations. If we were to require all sites, particularly the remoter sites, to comply with the health regulations, as local governments apply them to the more urban caravan parks, we would find that the cost of running them would be prohibitive on the department and on other partners.

The CHAIRMAN: Is it mainly the sewage and its reticulation?

Mr Sharp: Yes; it is general compliance with the standards for those sorts of developments. When a caravan park is developed in a more urban setting such as Hamelin Bay we apply those standards.

However, in the more remote stations, it is just not feasible. I actually do not think it is warranted. We have not had examples of people suffering calamitous infections and things.

The CHAIRMAN: I understand that DEC is now developing its own standards. Could you provide some information to the committee later on where the department is going with those? Do you have them in draft form?

Mr Sharp: We were intending to use a consultant to develop standards for nature-based camping. I am not sure that they have progressed very far at this stage, but, certainly, whatever has been done can be made available to the committee.

The CHAIRMAN: It might be useful to the committee in case some private sector groups, or even the farmers or others, want to provide similar types of services.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I go back to waste and rubbish. There has been some criticism from some local government authorities about DEC's philosophy of what you bring in, you take away, as far as rubbish goes. The claim from some of the shires is that the rubbish never goes back to Perth with people, but ends up in shire bins. Have you had much interaction with shires in trying to manage that issue?

Mr Sharp: It has not been raised directly with me. I am aware that it has been an issue from time to time in various localities, but we apply a principle called "the tread lightly principle" by which we say to people if they are coming into the estate and they are bringing stuff in, please do not leave it here and litter the landscape and make it unpleasant for other people. We ask them to take their rubbish out with them; number one, because it has environmental benefits for us; and, number two, because there is a large cost impost associated with managing rubbish waste treatments and downstream processing. We moved away from providing bins. Twenty-odd years ago we did provide bins and it chewed up a lot of money and resources; in fact, it encouraged a whole lot of people to dispose illegally and put a whole lot of domestic rubbish into our parks and reserves. We moved away from that and we found, in general terms, that there has been a high level of compliance. We have pretty good conditions around all our reserves. We do not have too much illegal littering and dumping.

The CHAIRMAN: Manjimup council was complaining, but it complained about a lot of things! I remember 20 years ago when DEC had dump sites, so I know the problems. There could be an alternative. Manjimup's problem was that people were taking their waste out of DEC sites, but they were dumping it in the facilities provided by the township of Manjimup. Perhaps an alternative solution would be to have a dump site at the entry of certain sites so that people can take their waste out of the camp ground and place it in the bins provided and then trucks can come along the highway and pick it up. Manjimup council was saying that DEC's philosophy was successful and the campers were taking their rubbish out, but they were taking it to the shires, not to the city.

Mr Sharp: They are saying that we have displaced rubbish and our costs have been foisted onto them.

The CHAIRMAN: They were also complaining about the lack of competitive neutrality between camping and caravan sites, which were struggling, and sites such as Shannon National Park. My view was they are chalk and cheese and are not competing as they are different types of services.

Mr Sharp: They are very different. One of the issues with Manjimup shire is that we control a lot of the land around there, which causes them some angst from time to time.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: On the question of camping, are there any commercial operators taking organised tours along the Bibbulmun Track?

Mr Sharp: Yes, there are. The Bibbulmun Track Foundation runs a program by which they sell guided tours to the private sector. They will go to a company that will develop a program that takes people down the Bibbulmun Track. Some licensed operators lead people down the track, but I think

there is a lot of potential for growth in that part of the marketplace, and it will become increasingly important in generating economic benefits to a number of communities down that track. It is 963 kilometres long.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: What percentage of the track is your responsibility?

Mr Sharp: It is 100 per cent. Essentially, it has been located to stay on DEC-managed lands. There have been occasions where, by virtue of the land tenure arrangements, it has had to go on to some private land. For example, at the moment, we are relocating a section of the Bibbulmun Track on the Nullaki Peninsula that was crossing private land. Due to some subdivisions going on, we have had to relocate some 16 kilometres of the track. The vast majority of the track is on state forest, national park or other DEC-tenured land.

The CHAIRMAN: We visited the Ningaloo area. The town of Exmouth does not have too many troubles in terms of overflow. Coral Bay has some problems, but there is also the issue of the cap of 3 000 beds. Let us face it, that will get to capacity very quickly—it already is. Even if you build working quarters, it will not make much difference. The Ningaloo Reef is 300 kays long, or something like that, and there are really no other access points to that whole area.

Mr Sharp: There are instances where people camp along that Ningaloo coast outside of Coral Bay. I am aware that Coral Bay has a squeeze point at school holiday times in July et cetera. I have been there myself and experienced it. That whole Ningaloo coast was subject to some studies under the WA Planning Commission through the Ningaloo Sustainable Development Office. Part of that plan talks about increasing the level of beds available in the northern end of the cape, that is, the caravan park on the top end of North West Cape. Coral Bay, I think, is going through a redevelopment process because of the issues associated with the disposal of waste and the provision of power.

[2.00 pm]

So they are trying to normalise and get a better arrangement there. In terms of the coast south of Coral Bay, you have about five pastoral leases, being Ningaloo, Cardabia, which surrounds Coral Bay, Warroora, Gnarlaloo and at the bottom end of Ningaloo Reef is Quobba. There is a little part of Quobba at Red Bluff where there is a surfing spot there. The length of that area is either pastoral lease or in the case of Gnarlaloo there are a couple of small lease areas that have been created under DPI arrangements. The pastoral lease runs to 40 metres above high water mark and the marine park runs to the 40-metre mark. There has been a longstanding recommendation by the EPA of the day that goes back to 1976 when the government of Sir Charles Court endorsed a recommendation that the coastal strip abutting Ningaloo for two kilometres should be reserved for public purposes because of the public amenity value. That has been an undertaking that governments of both political persuasions have carried on up-to-date, and we have been having discussions with the pastoral lessees to date about how we can better effectively manage the coast. People do take caravans into Ningaloo; they take them into Warroora and other locations. A lot of people actually illegally camp in the marine park. I do not think it is any secret to say that there have been issues there between our department and the pastoral lessees over the years. None of those issues, I think, cannot be resolved with goodwill on both parts, but there has been a strong series of representations by the pastoral lessees and people who support them to retain those pastoral lessees and allow for the lessees to manage for public camping and other accesses on those pastoral lessees. Our department has always expressed the view that we believe that we should continue with the undertaking that was endorsed by Sir Charles Court's government, which was to secure that coastal fringe area back into public ownership, manage it for public benefit and look at how we can best undertake that management activity in partnership with the pastoral lessees, given that they are present; because we do not actually have the management capacity. It is a long stretch of coastline, as you are aware, and if we are to be effective we actually have to develop an effective partnership with the people who are there. So we would propose and we have proposed to them that we would enter into some form of management agreement, they would act as our agents and then manage

those areas, and we would actually invest money in bringing the coastal strip there up to standard, which would meet the needs of the visiting public. Some of the coastline is going pretty well; other areas have got problems. I mean, I have had reports just last week that Leonie is having some issues at Warroora with people going through gates and snapping off the locks and chains and she has got some issues with waste disposal. It does not surprise me because we face very similar problems, but I am still waiting to find out from the government as to what its decision is on how it wants to progress the issues pertaining to the 2015 pastoral lease exclusion processes.

The CHAIRMAN: You would agree, though, that those are ideal spots for additional formalised camping facilities.

Mr Sharp: Absolutely!

The CHAIRMAN: And will need it because of the quality and proximity of that reef and whatnot.

Mr Sharp: Absolutely! I mean, it is a tremendous asset for Western Australia. Certainly in the long term I think that retaining that asset and managing it appropriately will deliver tremendous long-term benefits for the state, not only for people both engaged in business et cetera, but also for the community and the visiting public to our state. I mean, it is really a jewel in the crown and not too many people know about it. However, there are some fragile elements to that coastline and it will require effective management, and it will require the department to invest some substantial resources in various locations along that coast should it come into public ownership and management.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: I am just interested in looking at the expansion of camping and perhaps even some caravanning or four-wheel-drive vehicle facilities along that coastal strip should it be excised from the pastoral leases. Clearly in Coral Bay it has been demonstrated that there is a view that Coral Bay has a capacity of 3 000 people. Has DEC formed a view about what the capacity along the Ningaloo coastline at any given time might perhaps be?

Mr Sharp: We have not formed a view there. That was really the role of the Ningaloo Sustainable Development Office when they were doing the coastal plan. They identified a number of nodes for development. One such node is in Cape Range National Park for an eco lodge type development with capacity of, say, up to 100 beds. I think I would have to go back and have a look at the plan to give you better comment on what their approach was to caravans and camping activity on that coast, but certainly my recollection is that it was deemed as an activity that was very acceptable as long as we had in place some appropriate management arrangements and had hardened up some sites that have taken a bit of a caning. There have been issues where people have been camping with their caravans and their tents et cetera in areas and then been flooded and caused waste management concerns where people are essentially disposing of human waste and things immediately behind in the primary dunes and causing unpleasant experiences for those who follow them. That is the nicest way of putting it, I think.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: Further to that, I am interested in how the numbers are formulated for the acceptable level, if you like, of human activity along the coastline. It is an area that I am very familiar with and I understand the concerns that you have with regard to the behaviour of some people as they access those areas. Are you aware if the Ningaloo Sustainable Development Office has developed some kind of methodology to come up with these numbers or if it is just a guess?

Mr Sharp: No, I do not think they have developed a methodology but I might be corrected if Tracy knows better. I think from our perspective, if we are managing the areas, we would look at it on a range of criteria. We look at what the environmental capacity is and would ask in terms of this coast whether we had issues associated with turtle nesting and breeding areas, which happens at Jurabi park to the north. So we would look at a suite of aspects from the environmental perspective. Then we would look at the management capacity and what the capacity is of the existing infrastructure that is there in terms of toilets, water supply, roading and what needs to be done. It is fair to say that

you can increase the level of use and capacity by investment in resources and you can provide a reasonable level of protection to environmental values if you adequately invest. Because there are issues associated with environmental sensitivities et cetera, it does not actually have to be a preclusion for people going there, but you need to be cognisant of what the concerns are and then invest and manage the area appropriately. I do not think that has been done where the coastal pastoral leases are. They have been managing camping and they have been managing coastal access but they have not had proper authorisations by the government to do that in the past. I think they have actually been under-resourced as well. It is an issue that puts a demand on them. I think it is something that would require attention over the next decade. We would certainly be working with the pastoral lessees because even if that area were to be excised and it may end up being the two-kilometre strip or you may end up saying that you do not need the whole of the two-kilometre strip; it could be a boundary that comes back to where the main roading access is. So in some occasions it may come down to 500 metres from the coast; others might go further in. I think the principle behind naming the two kilometres was that it gave enough flexibility in terms of management for areas for caravans, for camping and putting parking areas and having road link-ups and rubbish disposal arrangements and all sorts of things there. The narrower the strip you make, the harder it is to meet all those undertakings and provide effective management. But we will need to invest money there, or the state, I think, will need to invest money there in the long term, and I think the state should be investing money there in the long term because it is an asset that I think the value of the natural area there is inestimable.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: So you have identified the Ningaloo as one hotspot, if you like, from the department's perspective in terms of visitation pressure.

Mr Sharp: Yes.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Are there any other emerging hotspots for the department in terms of visitation pressure in which the committee might be interested in terms of recommendations about where we need to be providing? We mentioned the south west as being one area that we are interested in, but are there any others, such as the Kimberley? Are there any other areas?

Mr Sharp: The Kimberley is an interesting area. I mean people talk about the global financial crisis and the decline in tourism. Our statistics are showing that tourism up to this point in time this year has been increasing eight per cent in the Kimberley. So even in light of the downturn, we are actually having an increase, a ramp-up, in terms of the visitation and demands on our agency. Clearly when people are travelling around in the Kimberley, they are either going and staying in accommodation that is provided in towns or in the pastoral leases et cetera, or they are going around in self-contained camper units or camping per se under tents. A large proportion of people who go into the Kimberley do it over extended periods of time. So they lob out to places like Mitchell Plateau, where we are having increased pressure, and there is increased pressure at Purnululu. We are seeing right along the Gibb River Road—we do not manage all the areas there, as you would appreciate—we are seeing that there has been increased numbers of people travelling in that area and looking for sites to camp. We are certainly seeing around Broome demands for people to go out and camp out of Broome; it is still strong. I think that it is fair to say that there are other locations in the Pilbara and the Gascoyne-Murchison area that are also experiencing some increased pressure.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: I suppose the committee is interested—I am interested, hopefully the committee is too—in the ageing population trends in Australia. You mentioned, Ms Shea, the issue of 12 million visits to DEC's conservation estate. From a strategic perspective, I am interested in what the department is doing. You mentioned that you would be very keen to work with Tourism WA and the Department of Planning, but I am interested in the 12 million figure. Is that a figure that is up and what trend is that? Is that a trending up statistic; because we face this wave—I will not say my Mandurah people are nomads—and we face this increased demand for sophisticated vehicles, the SUVs or RVs, or whatever they call them.

What is your department in particular doing from a strategic perspective in terms of these trends that we know of currently and what we need to plan for in the future? I think that is what the committee would be interested in hearing from you.

[2.15 pm]

Mr Sharp: That is a really good question. In fact, we are looking at developing visitor services plans on the Ningaloo coast and in the Kimberley. For the Kimberley we are using consultants who have expertise in the tourism area, and they will work with Tourism WA and consult various stakeholders to give us a more strategic approach on the sorts of facilities and services that we should be providing on our estate in light of all the pressures and the other things that are happening in the Kimberley. There is no doubt that the Kimberley will be a hot spot for the next 50 years. The growth of the oil and gas industry will put some interesting pressures on Broome and areas around there. But I think it will deliver a substantial increase in short-term recreational visits in the immediate vicinity of wherever people are residing. That is our experience in Karijini, I might say, with Rio Tinto's operations there: people go into the park when they have a couple of days off during their time there and cause us some angst and problems. But we are putting in place some arrangements. That will certainly be a pressure we face in the West Kimberley. The Ord final agreement and expansion is happening around Kununurra and we have arrangements in there. Six new conservation parks have been created there and we are working very well with the Kimberley Development Commission and the Miriuwung Gajerrong people, who have the native title agreement there. We see that a strategic approach in hot spots such as Ningaloo and the Kimberley will put us in a good position to make decisions about where we invest in terms of caravan parks.

The trends have been increasing. In fact a report was given to me a few days ago on our visitor statistics for the past 15 years. The trend shows an increase. In the past 12 months the number has still been going up. Western Australia is a very robust economy; it is a desirable location and has some outstanding natural values and amenities. We think that from an international visitor perspective and an interstate and intrastate perspective there will be increasing demand over the forthcoming years.

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: Those sorts of things in the report are quite critical to the committee's deliberations because we need to be able to support, through our recommendations and findings, what needs to happen from a broader policy level to cater for what you are saying is a trending up of numbers—people from across Australia visiting significant areas of the state for recreational and tourism purposes. That is report information. I am not sure whether that report is internal or publicly available.

Mr Sharp: It is internal, but I can certainly make it available to the committee. It will be something we make publicly available.

The CHAIRMAN: How are they coming? Are they grey nomads or fly-ins? Are they coming from Western Australia?

Mr Sharp: I do not have a breakdown of the figures in the report in front of me, but my recollection is that recently there has been a downturn in interstate visitation, which has been made up for by a substantial increase in intrastate visitation, so I suspect Western Australians are deciding to spend more time looking around Western Australia.

The CHAIRMAN: People from Mandurah!

Mr Sharp: Yes, grey nomads. I think we are all going to be grey nomads in the not-too-distant future; certainly I will be. I think the international visitor numbers have held pretty well. That is in the report, so you will be able to see that for yourselves. I will make that available to you. We have other statistics of a regional basis. I will ask our departmental people to pull whatever statistical information we have associated with visitation, camping et cetera together and make it available to you.

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: That will answer my question. With regard to the eight per cent increase in visitations you were talking about, I wonder whether they are an eight per cent increase to DEC-managed sites or a general eight per cent increase to Broome and the Kimberley.

Mr Sharp: These figures are based on our counts. We run a series of traffic counters at about 300 sites around the state and calibrate the counters with a number of people who are travelling around.

The CHAIRMAN: On your sites?

Mr Sharp: On our estate. We measure visits rather than visitor nights or something like that because it is a standard that is used in protected area management across Australia.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: I wondered whether you had much contact with the caravaners associations. I cannot remember their proper names but there are two basic clubs.

Mr Sharp: The Camping and Caravanning Club is one.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: Do you have much interaction with those large organisations?

Mr Sharp: I have not personally had a lot of interaction but I think that we do departmentally.

Ms Shea: Yes, we have a departmental representative on a committee that has been run by the former Department of Local Government and Regional Development. I have been one of the representatives on that group. I have had personal meetings with some of those club presidents and whatever to discuss our recreation and tourism and visitor services policies, and we have made those available. We have also recently included a representative of that industry on the Tourism Industry Reference Group that the department convenes.

Mr W.J. JOHNSTON: If I went to your website and keyed in “caravan and camping”, would I get anything back?

Mr Sharp: Yes. You would find camping information. That was one of our bugbears, I can tell you. Over the years we would ask for some feedback and information to be included on camping. It has been improved a lot.

Ms Shea: We are developing an online campsite booking system.

Mr Sharp: We will have that online. We are constantly seeking to improve our web-based information because that is the way a lot of people obtain information—even the grey nomads, Mr Templeman!

Mr D.A. TEMPLEMAN: People in Mandurah are very into the internet.

Mr Sharp: When I was down at Hopetoun I met the owner of the caravan park there. He said that almost all the grey nomads carry their laptops, which they do not have to plug in. They are geared up and get all the information. They meet everyone else who has been at the caravan park and they tell them where they have been and what they have seen, but they supplement that with interrogating the electronic medium.

The CHAIRMAN: They might be from Mandurah but they are not slow, right?

Mr Sharp: Ms Shea has mentioned the Landbank program, which was a program to identify some sites for accommodation, not necessarily caravan parks, but certainly the high-end eco-lodge type sites. They were looking at a number of locations in the DEC-managed lands. Three of those areas—Purnululu, Francois Peron and Millstream National Parks—were identified as potential sites for development in addition to things that are being done through other processes, such as the Ningaloo Sustainable Development Office. There is still an appetite in the tourism sector for us to continue with that approach and to have a look elsewhere, so I guess that ties in quite nicely with my indication to you earlier that, if Tourism and other authorities want to look at the capacity of the DEC estate to accommodate these sorts of things, we are more than happy to participate.

The CHAIRMAN: Thank you for your evidence. A transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for minor corrections. Any such corrections must be made to the transcript within 10 days. If the transcript is not returned, it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added via the corrections, but if you want to provide additional information, particularly of the type you have suggested, it would be very welcome and be considered. Thank you for your evidence today.

Mr Sharp: When would you like that information to be provided to you?

The CHAIRMAN: As soon as possible. We want to finish this up in September.

Mr Sharp: We will try to get it to you as quickly as we can.

Hearing concluded at 2.26 pm