

**Submission
No 6**

INQUIRY INTO TOURISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Name: Mr Michael Leonard

Date received: 17/06/2013

Inquiry into tourism in local communities

Matters relating to Item 6 in the Terms of Reference: 'Any other related matter'.

I am a resident of Barraba, a small town situated 93 km north of Tamworth in New South Wales. State Route 95, named '**The Fossickers' Way**', passes through the town.

One of the popular tourist attractions of the town is a former goldfield, 18 km to the east of Barraba. In the 1850s gold was discovered in and around Ironbark and Nangahrah Creeks and the village of Woodsreef came into being on that goldfield. All that remains of Woodsreef village is the church which is still functioning as a place of worship.

After the village was abandoned the area became a Recreational Reserve under the Lands Department and a group of local people became trustees. This group carried out work to tidy the area and install signs and markers to show where the houses and the business premises had been situated in the village.

Over time the group of trustees dwindled and was finally dissolved. At present the area is a State Conservation Area, CCAZ3, managed by the Department of Environment and Heritage NSW from their office in Armidale.

This SCA is an important recreational area for both the local people and tourists.

Because this bushland area has been a popular Barraba attraction for many years there is a move among some of the local people, including myself, to again tidy the area, signpost the walks and 4WD trails and generally make the place more attractive and accessible to a wider range of tourists.

We are fearful that our efforts may be in vain because the National Parks and Wildlife Service has a policy of forbidding fossicking in areas under their control, this without prior consultation with fossickers and interested organizations.

As a volunteer at the Barraba Information Centre I am constantly being asked for information on and directions to the Woodsreef Goldfield. It is a popular tourist attraction and an important magnet to our town.

When the reserve was managed by the Lands Department we knew where we stood with respect to ongoing access to the area. When it was taken over by the Department of Environment and Heritage the question of land use became more difficult to determine.

The reason why the Dept of Environment and Heritage is unable to give me a clear answer to this question is because the National Parks and Wildlife Service has a strong bias towards exclusion of fossicking when they draw up Plans of Management for State Conservation Areas. As a general rule 'consent to fossick' has been excluded from the plans of Management because fossicking is not considered compatible with conservation. This, despite the very low level of environmental impact of panning, electronic metal detecting and sluicing.

Having been a practicing gold fossicker (recreational miner) for many years I consider that this low environmental impact activity which is being carried out by thousands of Australians and many overseas visitors should be given due consideration by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

These recreational miners, have, in the main, invested in the latest panning, sluicing and metal detecting equipment. This equipment is designed to cause negligible environmental damage.

Any rubbish (metal cans, lengths of barbed wire and so on) that they discover during their fossicking is deposited in a tote bag and carried away for proper disposal. Their code of conduct requires them to back-fill all holes. They are in the bush because **they love the bush** and are not about to damage it. They cause less damage than a wombat or a sudden flash flood in the creek.

We suggest that the National Parks and Wildlife Service take a more balanced approach to land usage in the bush.

The city based Environmental 'experts' should take the time to drive a few hundred kilometres away from the bricks and mortar and discover the 'bush'. They will find that they have been misled by their extremist advisors, who, in the main, have never pitched a tent or cooked on a camp fire.

What has all this to do with tourism? Simply this: Many small towns such as Barraba rely on their gold and gemstone fossicking areas to attract tourists to their town. The hint of gold is a strong attraction to thousands of Australians and overseas tourists.

If these tourists find that the National Parks and Wildlife services in NSW are throwing up fences with locked gates or erecting signs prohibiting fair use of our traditional fossicking areas, then they will drive on, over the border, to do their fossicking in a more enlightened State.

The villages whose names Australians associate with historic gold rushes (and therefore 'worth a visit') will fade from memory and will lose the tourist dollars vital to their survival.

This is not conjecture. As a travelling gold seeker I have witnessed the ever shrinking area of available fossicking venues. There is no disagreement that certain areas should remain restricted because of the fragile nature of the flora or fauna found there.

But there are vast areas within our National Parks and Conservation Areas where creek beds and old river valley floors can be gazetted as fossicking areas. All we ask for is 'fair use' and the recognition of the fact that fossicking for gold and gemstones is a popular outdoor activity enjoyed by thousands of Australians.

- It gets people of all ages out into the bush where they walk and climb to get the exercise we all need to combat obesity and other health problems.
- It is a low environmental impact activity.
- It is not **mining** in the normal meaning of the word, where vast quantities of material are processed.
- It brings tourists to towns and villages which grew up as a result of gold mining and continue to exist because of nearby fossicking areas.

Our plea, as prospectors, fossickers and semi-precious gem collectors is that when the NSW Mining Act is next reviewed, the authorities consult with the prospectors, fossickers and gemstone collectors and their incorporated associations.

Michael Lawrence Leonard

13 June 2013