

Update

Public Land Tour Operator and Activity Provider Licence Reform Project

Issue No 2 September 2005

The Project...

The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) is leading a project to reform the licensing system for tour operators and outdoor activity providers operating on public land.

This project seeks to improve current licensing arrangements to encourage a viable, growing, nature based tourism industry on public land and ensure safe and sustainable use of that land.

Specifically, the project objectives are to:

1. Create a simpler and more efficient licensing system;
2. Improve opportunities for industry investment and security;
3. Encourage higher operating standards;
4. Improve management of capacity – both environmental and visitor;
5. Improve compliance with licensing requirements;
6. To manage all organised groups in an appropriate and equitable manner.

The project is being overseen by a steering committee comprised of representatives from the DSE, Parks Victoria, Tourism Victoria and Tourism Alliance.

Directions Paper...

The Directions Paper is a key document in the project. It will outline the proposed changes to the licensing system for tour operators and outdoor activity providers operating on public land and will be the main vehicle for community consultation.

The Directions Paper will address a wide range of issues related to licensing.

Following are just a few of the directions that the paper is likely to propose:

- Increased maximum licence terms;
- The ability to transfer licences in limited circumstances;
- A clearer definition of which organisations actually require a licence;
- Initiatives to encourage consistency in operating standards for licensees and those groups remaining outside the licensing system (schools, clubs, community organisations, etc);
- Changes to the fee structure, in line with Government guidelines;
- New incentives to encourage increased professionalism through accreditation and other schemes;
- A focus on achieving voluntary compliance through increased education and awareness programs, supported by tighter offence and penalty provisions;
- Initiatives to improve consistency and coordination between the Parks Victoria managed licensing system and the systems of other land managers.

The Directions Paper has been drafted and is currently being reviewed by DSE and

other Government agencies. It is planned to be released for public comment in the near future.

Once complete, it will be distributed for wider circulation and comment. It will also be available from both the DSE and Parks Victoria websites.

If you would like to receive a copy of the paper, register your interest by sending an e-mail to licence.reforms@dse.vic.gov.au.

Benchmarking Survey...

In order to be able to measure the success of the Public Land Tour operator and Outdoor Activity Provider Licence Reform Project, it is necessary to obtain some baseline data on the attitudes of licensed tour operators towards the current licensing system. This data will provide a benchmark against which future changes can be measured.

This baseline data will be collected through a series of telephone interviews. A researcher has been appointed and will commence interviews following school holidays and prior to the busy Christmas period. A formal letter will be sent out to operators advising of this process prior to interviews commencing.

Information provided in these surveys will influence the future development of the licensing system. It is an excellent opportunity for the industry to let DSE know what works well and what needs to be fixed.

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Your Input...

Your comments on the Directions Paper will assist DSE to develop a licensing system that meets the needs of the tourism industry and recreational users of public land.

There are two ways to provide comment on the paper:

- Through the organisations on the Project Reference Group (which include Tourism Alliance, Camping Association Victoria, Outdoor Recreation Centre, Victorian Outdoor Education Association, Bus Association of Victoria, Victorian National Parks Association);
- Directly to the project team at licence.reforms@dse.vic.gov.au

Snapshot 04/05...

In 2004/2005 more than 100, 000 visitor days to public land managed by Parks Victoria and DSE can be attributed to guided commercial recreation and tourism activities.

In total, there were 256 licensed operators that year.

Your Questions Answered...

School Groups – Some licensees argue that school groups shouldn't be allowed access to public land without a licence. They argue that the licence conditions applied to licensed tour operators should also apply to school groups, as the conditions are designed to protect safety and the environment, irrespective of who is accessing public land.

Licensing school groups however, is neither desirable nor practical. It would impose a huge administrative burden on teachers and land managers and also contradicts an objective for which public land is set aside – education. Instead, a range of new initiatives are proposed in the Directions Paper to better manage the impact of school groups visiting public land, including:

- Schools to be made aware that they must ensure external contractors are licensed;
- Better booking and notification systems to ensure schools have made the necessary arrangements with land managers prior to visiting.

In addition, the Department of Education and Training is updating its guidelines 'Safety in Outdoor Adventure Series', which will also assist in managing the impact of school groups visiting public land. It is expected that the guidelines will meet or exceed the standards set by the Adventure Activity Standards (which apply to commercial operators).

Illegal Operators – Businesses using public land without permission are breaking the law. Legislation governing National Parks, State Forests and most other types of public land generally contains provisions making it illegal to conduct commercial activities without a licence or permit.

There are many reports of businesses operating on public land without licences. Such operators are not only operating illegally, but also threaten the integrity of the industry, potentially pose a threat to the safety of their customers and the environment and may not be adequately insured.

This problem is exacerbated by a lack of understanding of who actually requires a licence. Creating a clearer definition of who must hold a licence will lead to increased understanding of who requires a licence, in turn enabling land managers to focus more clearly on those organisations and individuals operating without a licence.

Upcoming Parks Victoria Tour Operator Workshops...

Parks Victoria is convening three half-day workshops at Ballarat, Jells Park and Mansfield for licensed tour operators during October 2005. Workshops will commence at 10.00am and finish at 3.15pm. Morning tea and lunch will be provided. Representatives from Parks Victoria, DSE, Tourism Alliance and Tourism Victoria will attend.

Workshops will focus on:

- The past year and the year ahead;
- Proposed reforms to the licensing system;
- Visitor research (including a survey of all Licensed Tour Operator websites);
- Product development and marketing opportunities;
- Development of a Nature Based Tourism Strategy for Victoria.

Melbourne - 4 October Ballarat - 5 October Mansfield - 12 October

For more information contact Susan Newcombe from Parks Victoria on 8627 4841.