

# Why Lithgow Can be one of Australia's Top Eco-Tourism Destinations

**A speech by Michael Keats, OAM, at the opening of "Lithgow's Ancient Natural Gardens" exhibition at Lithgow Library and Learning Centre, on 31 March 2017.**

I would like to change the title of the topic and claim that Lithgow is already a top Australian eco-tourism destination.

The images by Julie Favell that surround us in the Lithgow Library today are ample evidence of what the Lithgow Local Government Area can offer. But like the well-used phrase, there is more, a lot more.

The issue is that too few people know about what environmental reaches Lithgow has, and even fewer are prepared to 'come out' and market it. For years the spiel from the Lithgow City Council has been all about coal. In hard economic terms, the place of coal and associated industries is declining. The news in the SMH, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2017 – "China to close its largest coal fired power station" is a typical story.

As happened many times before, Lithgow and its city fathers need to reinvent themselves and the role of the city in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

What the Lithgow City Council city fathers and mothers need to do is 'upsell' the real, intrinsic values of the Lithgow Local Government Area. The future prosperity of Lithgow is in eco-tourism and associated industries of personalised transport, gourmet catering, personalised tour guiding, 'hotel' support services such as laundry, walking track development and maintenance, opening up new destinations on the Newnes Plateau and much more. Collaboration with a range of authorities and private entrepreneurs to maximise the very real latent potential that just requires vision and support.

Cities further west of Lithgow currently do a lot better in attracting eco-tourists. Very, very few tourists are turned on by the prospect of visiting a coal mine or a power station or worse the aftermath of open cut mining.

Orange has a huge gold mine but it talks up what really matters to visitors - wineries, food and scenery. Bathurst talks up events such as the Mount Panorama car races and promotes the learning opportunities at the Charles Sturt University. Both are vibrant, growing communities. Lithgow needs to consciously develop and encourage a full spectrum of future industries. Eco-tourism is at the core.

Just back up the road towards Sydney another council, the Blue Mountains City Council, has been actively and successfully promoting tourism for decades. Katoomba, like Lithgow, was a coal town and a rough one at that. Indeed, it was at one time called 'The Crushers'.

Katoomba–Leura now is a much sought after destination not only to live, but it attracts tens of thousands of international tourists every day who visit the attractions on offer. All the ancillary businesses, from cafes to bookshops, are thriving. A series of annual festivals increase the magnetic pull of the location.

In my assessment, what is on offer in Lithgow and environs is far greater than the Blue Mountains. Let me repeat that sentence.

**In my assessment, what is on offer in Lithgow and environs is far greater than the Blue Mountains.**

I have seen hundreds of tourists at Echo Point in a state of mild euphoria. Just imagine their state if they were looking out over the Capertee Valley from Pearsons Lookout. Better still, if they could do it from a glass-walled eatery. All that is needed is some entrepreneurial action to establish a quality food/coffee/gift shop, outdoor seating, amenities, etc., and this area would be on the tourist map in no time. Energetic types would be encouraged to walk up trails (yet to be built) to the top of Blackmans Crown and be absolutely transfixed by the view over the Capertee Valley, Pantoneys Crown and Mount Airly – Genowlan Mountain. Transit visitors, currently hell bent on getting to the wineries at Mudgee, could easily be persuaded to stop for lunch at Pearsons Lookout. This is just one destination of dozens of potential options.

The Lithgow City Council should be actively promoting Lithgow with all in-bound travel organisations, the big cruise ship companies and with travel agents that look after specific tour groups such as the Chinese and Japanese.

A visit to the website 'Destination NSW - Nature Based Tourism to NSW- September 2016' is a revelation. Visitors interested in nature come to NSW in huge numbers - 3.1 million overseas visitors to the year ended September 2016, and with loaded wallets. Remember these are only nature-based tourists. These are people who want to visit the best destinations to experience the real Australia with natural beauty of scenery, wild animals, rare plants and the opportunity to walk, photograph and enjoy.

Lithgow is a top destination, never forget it, Lithgow is a top destination.

The average spend per international visitor for nature-based tourism is \$2,790, and that includes visitors who do it on the cheap. All up, these tourists spent 8.8 billion dollars. **All up, these tourists spent 8.8 billion dollars.** Central Western NSW at present attracts only 1.2% of the international visitor market. The scope for growth is huge. Better still, these visitors are desperate to see pristine environments, eat gourmet meals and buy souvenirs. When they return home, they act as ambassadors to promote Lithgow with their friends who add Lithgow to their must do bucket list.

See more in the Appendix at the end.

**Why Lithgow?**

The local government area which has Lithgow as its administrative centre is one of the best endowed regions of geo and bio diversity in NSW if not Australia. For example, the Muggii Murum-ban State Conservation Area alone has over 530 species of plants. That is fantastic, in an area of less than 4000 ha. Some countries cannot match such biodiversity. The MMBSCA has a complex geology and geomorphology that includes some of the world's best examples of pagoda landforms. Views from the plateau top of the Capertee Rim and the

Capertee Valley are world class, and even a drive through is a salutary experience. And that is just one locality! I would match the panoramas of the Capertee Valley with the Grand Canyon in the USA.

Nearby, the Wolgan Valley is another gem for even the most jaundiced traveller. Stop at Wolgan Gap and scan the dissected and toothed rim is a view of unmatched grandeur; drive down to Newnes at the constriction in the valley; and you have a totally memorable experience.

Accessing the Gardens of Stone National Park from Ben Bullen by 4WD provides a whole new experience of viewing the Capertee Valley. A short, easy walk to the Moffitts Pagodas is a totally rewarding experience. At many times of the year, you are in the company of Wedge Tail Eagles. The intricate passages under the pagodas are another magic world.

1 Ideally positioned.

Getting to Lithgow is a delight by car either via the Bells Line of Road or the Great Western Highway. Both roads offer spectacular views of the Blue Mountains National Park entry to Lithgow. The Bells Line of Road descends via Scenic Hill. A stop at the POW memorial park or on the tops provides a great enticing vista over Mount Walker and the Marrangaroo National Park.

Lithgow is so close to Sydney - by car (2 hours) or by rail. Two rental car companies have fleets of vehicles for hire in Lithgow.

2 Spectacular National Parks and areas yet to be gazetted as national parks surround Lithgow. Unique and rare plants, animals, canyons, waterfalls, classic rock climbing, astonishing aboriginal art sites, early European history and industrial archaeology.

Within easy reach of Lithgow, are 4 major national parks, the Blue Mountains, the Wollemi, the Gardens of Stone and the Capertee; and a smaller rarely visited one, Marrangaroo National Park. And to that, add Mugii Murrumbidgee SCA, Hassans Walls and the spectacular Newnes Plateau. What a smorgasbord of wonder!

3 Accommodation already in place at all levels.

National Park camping - Newnes, Dunns Swamp that have a range of amenities to serve campers or holiday makers who do not want to rough it completely. There are self-catering commodious holiday cottages at Newnes; The Royal Hotel at Capertee or various B&B establishments in the Capertee Valley. All the way to 6 star luxury at the Emirates One&Only in the Wolgan Valley. In Lithgow, there are 18 hotels/motels to choose from with tariffs to suit every budget.

In discussions with representatives of the Emirates it is clear that they made their investment decision to spend an initial \$125million not only because they were required to by the Australian Government; they recognised the Wolgan Valley and adjacent Wollemi and Gardens of Stone national parks as being the best world class destinations in Australia to spend that money. Emirates could have chosen anywhere in Australia. They chose the Wolgan Valley. That decision was not made lightly. It was made after checking out many

potential sites up and down the east coast. A constant stream of international visitors confirms this investment decision.

#### 4 Resources for visitors, books, etc.

There are now 8 comprehensive texts on the wonders of the Gardens of Stone National Park to help plan walking and adventuring activities. No other national park in Australia has such a comprehensive body work written about it. The website [bushexplorers.com.au](http://bushexplorers.com.au) chronicles current walking opportunities for visitors to join in on adventures. Newnes Cottages proprietor Thomas Ebersoll has maps and guide notes for a number of short local walks for visitors of varying degrees of fitness and desire.

There is already a text on crossing the Wollemi National Park from north to south. Several more texts on the Wollemi National Park are in preparation.

A text dedicated to the Mugii Murum-ban SCA, regarded as a part of the Gardens of Stone National Park, is close to finality.

Suzanne Lollback, Helen Drewe, Robert Coveny and Ken Durie have produced a fully illustrated text on the Native Plants of Hassans Walls Reserve- a mere half an hour away for a day adventure from the Lithgow CBD.

Keith Paynter has just last week released a new book on Hassans Walls. The content, covering the history, geology plants and bushwalking, is amazing and enables the visitor to navigate their way around and enjoy a sample of what is on offer.

Lithgow Visitors Information Centre can help with maps and directions and travel plans.

#### 5 Access points

The Wollemi National Park can be accessed from Newnes or from Dunns Swamp. The Gardens of Stone National Park can be accessed from many locations in the Capertee and Wolgan Valleys, from Ben Bullen as well as the Newnes Plateau.

6 Activities in all the National Parks and the SCA include sightseeing, bushwalking, (at all levels from short easy walks to complex adventure walks), camping, canyoning, photography, birdwatching, caving.

#### 7 Food and coffee

Lithgow is transforming and losing its reputation as rough, none to pleasant coal mining town. The population, some of whom commute to Sydney, is growing more sophisticated, and slowly it is attracting more businesses that are environmentally friendly. Top restaurants and coffee shops such as Salud can be found, and many now open to cater for early morning visitors and good food at night as well.

#### 8 A network of easy walks to enjoy

While you can do a lot of sightseeing and enjoy a lot of scenery from the comfort of a vehicle, preferably a 4WD, enjoying most of the detailed beauty in the national parks requires reasonable walking fitness. One project that needs to be done by the Lithgow

Visitors Information Centre is to map the easy walks and destinations that involve walking at a moderate pace for 30 minutes, an hour, two hours etc. A surprising number of walks can be completed by people with moderate fitness.

The destinations that require more effort I always regard as a challenge and the best motivation to get fit and stay fit.

## 9 Thousands of more challenging walks

Brian Fox, Yuri Bolotin, and I have been exploring the areas around Lithgow for over 15 years. Amazingly, even walking twice a week, we rarely if ever repeat a walk. The natural endowment of the area is so vast and complex, several lifetimes are needed to see even a part of it. From our walks, we have generated notes to guide others into this wonderland. We are always willing to share and to invite visitors, both local and international, to join us.

Seven NSW Department of Lands 1:25000 topographic maps, Lithgow, Cullen Bullen, Ben Bullen, Mount Morgan, Glen Alice, Capertee and Rock Hill have so much wonder to explore, we doubt that we will ever cover them adequately and discover all the treasures they contain.

### **Images**

While I have been talking, you have had the joy of being able to see images on the screen and of course Julie's amazing photographs. These only touch the fringes of some of the wonders in this area. Many of you will have experienced first-hand the scenery, the plants, the animals, the waterfalls, and the canyons.

We know how magical the area is. This exhibition is a small but significant step to alerting the wider community and the international community about what we have.

### **The next steps**

The next steps are two fold. One, is to have the Lithgow City Council believe in the value of what is here and to take positive initiatives to construct tracks, install signage and publicise the grandeur of the destination. The second step is for Lithgow City Council to work with Tourism NSW and in-bound tour operators and show them that Lithgow is indeed a top eco-tourism destination.

## Appendix

Data from website 'Destination NSW - Nature Based Tourism to NSW- September 2016'

### **VISITOR MARKET SIZE AND EXPENDITURE**

In the YE Sep 16, the total number of International, Domestic overnight and Daytrip nature based visitors to NSW were 26.9 million. Of these, 11.7% were from Overseas, 41.5% were from the Domestic overnight market and 46.8% were Domestic Daytrip visitors. Nature based visitors accounted for 83.6% of International visitors<sup>3</sup> to NSW, 38.4% of Domestic overnight visitors and 22.2% of Daytrip visitors to NSW.

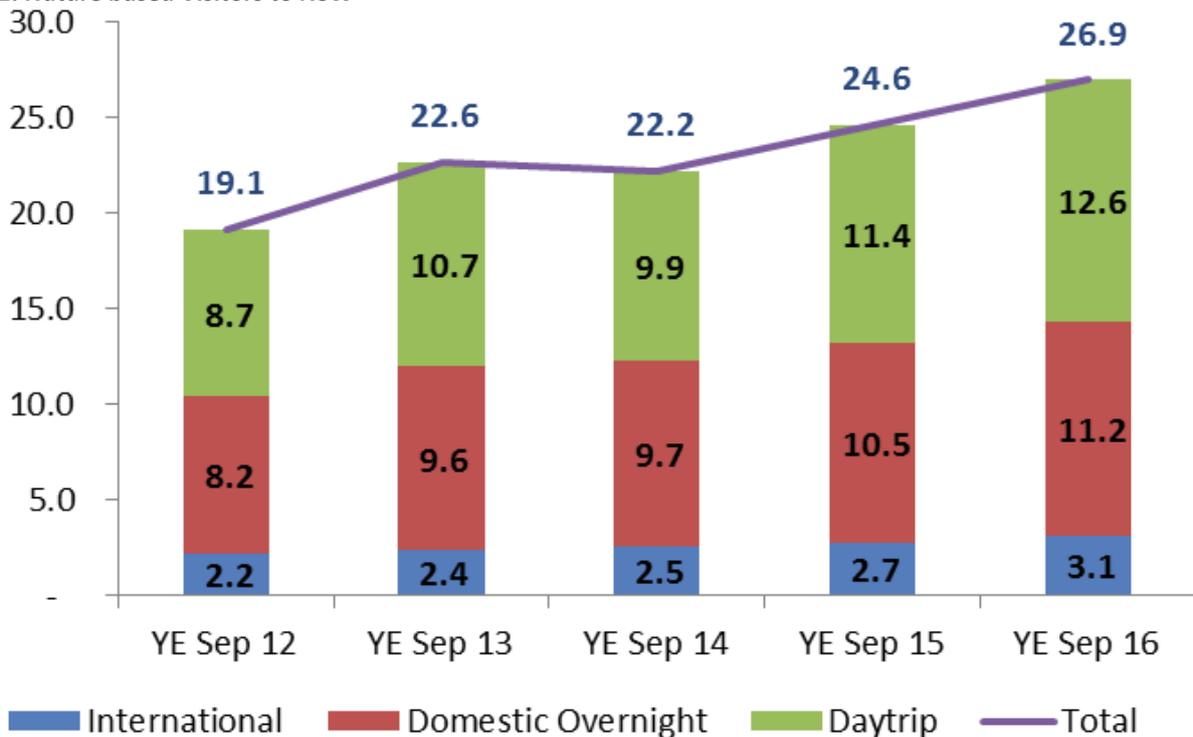
Nature based visitors stayed 119.7 million nights and spent \$18.3 billion. International visitors stayed 2x longer than Domestic overnight visitors in terms of median length of stay and hence, the average spend per visitor for International visitors was almost 4x that of Domestic overnight visitors.

<i>Table 1. Visitors, Nights and Expenditure</i>	<b>Visitors (million)</b>	<b>Nights (million)</b>	<b>Average Length of Stay</b>	<b>Median Length of Stay</b>	<b>Total spend (\$ billion)</b>	<b>Spend per visitor</b>	<b>Spend per night</b>
<b>International Visitors</b>	3.1	77.9	25 nights	6 nights	8.8	\$2,790	\$113

## Nature Based Tourism to NSW

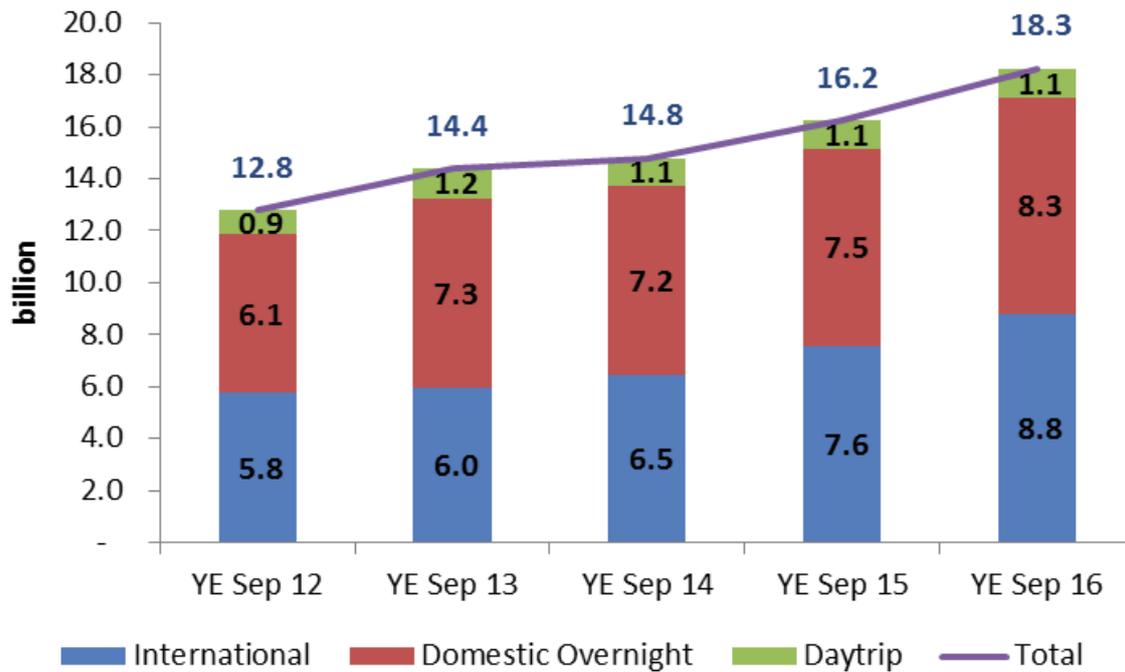
**Year Ended September 2016** *Chart 2. Nature based Visitor Nights in NSW*

*1. Nature based Visitors to NSW*



Definition: A nature based visitor participates in at least one of the following activities: bushwalking or rainforest walks; visit national parks or State parks; whale or dolphin watching; visit botanical or other public gardens; visit farms; go to the beach; visit wildlife parks, zoos or aquariums; and visit the outback (international visitors only). Note: a visitor may also participate in other activities. This activity list has some variations from the definition used by Tourism Research Australia. 2 Source: International Visitor Survey and National Visitor Survey, YE Sep 16, Tourism Research Australia. 3 International visitors who engaged in a nature based activity in Australia, not necessarily in NSW.

*Chart 3. Nature based Visitor Expenditure in NSW*



In the YE Sep 16, total nature based visitors, nights and expenditure to NSW increased by 9.6%, 6.0% and 12.4% respectively on YE Sep 15. International visitor spend increased the highest (+16%), followed by Domestic overnight spend (+10%).

Compared to YE Sep 12, total nature based visitors, nights and expenditure to NSW grew by 40.9%, 27.9% and 42.9% respectively. In terms of visitors, the number of Domestic day trip visitors grew the most over the five-year period (+45%), followed by International visitors (+42%) and Domestic overnight visitors (+37%). In terms of expenditure, International visitor spend recorded the highest growth (+52%), followed by Domestic overnight spend (+37%).

In the YE Sep 2016, China (19.2%) was the largest source of International nature based visitors to the State, followed by USA (11.4%) and UK (10.7%). Over 90% of Chinese visitors to NSW participated in nature based activities during their trip.

Compared to YE Sep 15, the nature based visitors to NSW grew by 14.5%. Over the same period, China, USA and Korea grew by 23.7%, 24.2% and 27.5%, respectively.

China (17.7%) was also the largest source market in terms of International nature based visitor nights in the State, followed by UK (9.9%) and Korea (7.4%). International nature based visitors stayed an average of 24.8 nights in NSW.

Since YE Sep 2012, China had been the largest source market of International nature based visitors to NSW and also the largest contributor to visitor nights in NSW.

In the YE Sep 16, the youth market (15-29 years) was the largest age group among International nature based visitors (35.6%), Domestic overnight nature based visitors (25.3%), and Domestic daytrip nature based visitors (30.4%) to NSW.

In the last 5 years, the youth market has been the largest age group of International Nature based visitors, Domestic overnight nature based visitors, and Domestic daytrip nature based visitors to NSW.