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Caravanning and Camping a Disappearing Pastime

Dr Mike Nahan, as Chairman of the Economics and Industry Standing Committee, tabled a report in Parliament recently into the "Provision, Use and Regulation of Caravan Parks (and Camping Grounds) in Western Australia.

"Caravanning and camping have long been a central part of the Western Australian way of life, whether it be family vacations by the sea during school holidays, exploring the great outback or undertaking the grand tour to the north and beyond," said Dr Nahan.

"The network of caravan and camping facilities around the state is a vital part of the State's tourism industry and constitutes a sizeable business in its own right. But our investigations have shown that this way of life is under threat and caravan parks and camping grounds are disappearing because of several factors, including urban encroachment and rising land values, particularly along the coast."

Dr Nahan said 530-page report, comprising of 151 findings, 57 recommendations and covering 107 submissions, found that caravan parks are disappearing and that many of the remaining parks are filling with permanent residents, which is reducing the available space for tourists.

"The loss of caravan and camping infrastructure is not new but these problems are a longstanding concern to many local governments, park owners, caravan groups, regional governments, community members and park residents," said Dr Nahan.

"The committee found that very little has been done to address that decline and we believe it should be a priority to ensure the future viability of this Australian way of life."

Dr Nahan cited several examples of the loss of caravan and camping infrastructure.

"A classic example is Mandurah where many caravan parks have closed over the last decade. Just six parks remain and of those, 87 per cent of the available space is currently occupied by long-stay residents, leaving only 80 sites available to tourists," said Dr Nahan.

"Busselton, another traditional family holiday centre, is much the same. It has lost 15 parks over the past few decades and two of the remaining 11 parks have limited or no short-stay sites for tourists."

Dr Nahan said although no parks were being closed in the Pilbara region, they are filled with workers to the virtual exclusion of tourists.

"As a result, caravanners making the 1,500-kilometre trek from Exmouth to Broome have no place to stay along the way. Despite caravan parks being the foundation of the Broome economy, they are either full or disappearing.

"To stem that loss and to ensure the creation of new parks, the report identified a number of recommendations, including that the government procure and zone parcels of land for new caravan parks," said Dr Nahan.

"The Government should purchase the redevelopment rights of privately owned parks on strategic sites, and encourage and assist pastoral lessees to develop and manage nature-based parks on their lease holdings."

"In particular, the Government should ensure that the Department of Environment and Conservation sets aside a much greater proportion of its estate for low-cost, nature-based caravan parks and camping grounds."

"LandCorp, the Department of Planning and other planning and development agencies also need to include caravan parks in their structural and regional plans. These actions will come at a cost but are necessary to sustain the industry."

Dr Nahan said another major finding in the report is that there is a major shift underway in the demand for caravanning and camping services towards nature-based facilities and towards urban recreational and vacation parks with limited services and low costs.

"This is being driven by a rise in the number of grey nomads or winter drifters, who drift towards the sun and back; and freedom seekers, people who like to go out in a four-wheel drive on the weekend and enjoy the great outdoors," said Dr Nahan.

"There has also been a growth in the number of large, self-contained caravans pulled by four-wheel drive vehicles. These trends should be given priority when identifying, developing and zoning new facilities."

Dr Nahan said one of the key reasons for limited effective action to date has been the lack of a champion of this Australian way of life among government agencies.

"It is the view of the committee that Tourism Western Australia has tended to focus excessively on high-end, high-cost tourism at the expense of the caravanning and camping sector. This must change," said Dr Nahan.

"It is of concern that Tourism Western Australia does not have a budget item for caravanning and camping, and does not include it in its strategic plan."

"The committee strongly believes that the caravanning and camping sector has a bright but changing future as long as we act now and ensure that basic infrastructure remains in place for future generations of the community to enjoy this pleasant pastime."

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