

## **Parks & Culture: Nature-Based Tourism**

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### **Sustainable Tourism Online is an EarthCheck initiative.**

Sustainable Tourism Online (STO) is a comprehensive online information resource delivering substantial research, data and tools within three main sustainability themes – Destinations & Communities, Business Operations, and Parks & Culture. STO also offers relevant information and knowledge on broader sustainability tourism topics.

Developed by Australia's Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre (STCRC) in 2010 to support sustainable policy, planning and practice, STO provides access to tourism research and tools developed by STCRC as well as other trusted sources of information.

Nature-based tourism is tourism that relies on experiences directly related to natural attractions. Australia is blessed with a diverse range of ecosystems, breathtaking landscapes and unusual wildlife. These natural attractions make Australia one of the leading providers of nature-based tourism in the world, attracting over 5.6 million international visitors in 2009. Australia's national parks and protected areas are the basis for nature-based tourism experiences and underpin Australia's \$80 billion tourism industry.

# 1. FORMS OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Nature-based tourism is expressed through various forms of tourism including ecotourism, geotourism, cycle tourism, adventure tourism, wildlife tourism and cruise ship tourism.

## 1.1 CRUISE SHIP TOURISM

Cruise ship tourism has experienced strong international growth in recent years and is diversifying its products and creating and developing new market niches (see [Tourism Queensland's Cruise Destinations](#)). Australia has also experienced significant growth with almost a third of all international visits to Tasmania in 2002 being by cruise ship. The expeditions cruise market is a key segment and is characterized by its nature-based focus, in many cases involving adventure activities and interpretative and educational components in remote locations. Cruise ships can offer safe, rapid access to wild and remote locations like the Kimberley coast, north Queensland and Tasmania's west coast, locations with exceptional cruise tourism demand or potential.

## 1.2 CULTURAL HERITAGE TOURISM

Cultural Heritage Tourism is a natural partner to eco and nature-based tourism. **Heritage** is a broad term applied to things, places and practices, which we value and wish to conserve for future generations. In Australia cultural heritage is often divided into Indigenous heritage and the period following colonisation.

Many tourists gain exposure to Indigenous culture in national parks and other natural settings. Indigenous people have a deep and ongoing relationship with the Australian landscape. Many Indigenous communities have connections to national parks and other protected areas. In some places this is reflected in joint management or partnerships to manage areas of land for conservation, tourism and cultural heritage outcomes. Indigenous people provide an alternative perspective on land and wildlife management that adds value to contemporary land

management practices. Shared or joint management is fundamental to accommodating Aboriginal cultural tourism and its ongoing development in national parks (see [DEH's Steps to Sustainable Tourism](#)). It also allows Aboriginal people to share their culture and stories, which in turn can provide tangible benefits to traditional owners.

Research undertaken by the STCRC identify the following benefits from Indigenous Cultural tourism:

- Economic opportunities for Indigenous groups;
- Promotion of self determination;
- Cross cultural exchange;
- Preservation of traditional cultures, and
- Natural resource management.

Factors impacting on the successful development of Indigenous tourism include a lack of skills, ownership, and available finance; competition for eco/nature-based tourism; a low market profile; cultural factors; the structure and administration of government programs; and assistance and issues relating to any small and remote business. In addition, the lack of formal and informal business networks between Indigenous people and businesses and the mainstream tourism industry is an impediment. There are also unhelpful mainstream industry perceptions of Indigenous tourism.

Recent research indicates that Australia's cultural and heritage tourism market in 2007 was predominantly comprised of domestic visitors. In 2007, there were 10.9 million domestic overnight visitors who participated in cultural or heritage activities and 10.4 million domestic day visitors. Since 2006 the number of domestic overnight cultural and heritage visitors has grown by 11% while total domestic overnight visitation remained flat over this same period. Tourism Research Australia (TRA) research indicates international cultural and heritage visitors have increased 3% since 2006. This was slightly higher than total international visitors during this period (2%). Both international (40 nights) and domestic (6 nights) cultural and heritage visitors stay longer than international and domestic non-cultural and heritage visitors (20 nights and 4 nights respectively).

Recent cultural tourism research projects by the STCRC have focused on:

- The development and implementation of methodologies to estimate the economic value that Australians place on national cultural institutions;
- Ways to assist the Australian tourism industry (particularly those located in regional and rural areas) in understanding the growing importance of cultural tourism, by developing a number of case studies of cultural landscapes tourism;

- The development of factors that contribute to success in achieving viable cultural heritage tourism and heritage conservation goals;
- Examples of cost effective strategies to revive and update interpretation in a heritage tourist attraction, and
- How to enhance the sustainable use of heritage sites in Australian tourism through the development of a thematic framework for the interpretation of cultural heritage sites for use in tourism.

## 1.3 CYCLE TOURISM

Cycle tourism is a fast growing sector of the tourism industry. Cycle tourism includes leisure and day cyclists, touring cyclists, mountain bikers and event cyclists. While limited research is available on the size, scope and nature of cycle tourism and international cycle tourists, the rapid growth in domestic bicycle sales and cycle path and trail development has seen participation rates increase by 15% in recent years triggering the growth of an important niche tourism market.

## 1.4 Eco-TOURISM

Ecotourism differs from other forms of nature-based tourism in that its core ideology is to promote education and awareness of the environment and heritage, help finance future conservation and improve the well-being of local people and environment (see [The International Ecotourism Society](#)) According to [Ecotourism Australia](#) ecotourism is “ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation”.

## 1.5 GEO-TOURISM

Geotourism encompasses tourists looking at and appreciating natural landscapes including the landforms, rocks and processes that shaped them over time (see [Geotourism](#) by R Dowling and D Newsome). The Earth’s landscapes and geological wonders have inspired people all over the world and are a fundamental part of a culture’s identity. Many also form the basis for the establishment of protected areas and World Heritage Sites. An emerging area of geo-conservation and management is Geoparks, a UNESCO initiative. Geoparks are a nationally protected area containing a number of geological heritage sites of particular importance, rarity or aesthetic appeal. [Geoparks](#) achieve their goals through conservation, education and Geotourism.

## 1.6 MARINE PARKS

Setting new benchmarks in marine conservation, education and management, community initiatives, not-for organisations and enterprising tour operators prove that CSR can transcend the board room and galvanise entire communities.

## 1.7 NATURE-BASED TOURISM

Nature-based tourism is any type of tourism that relies on experiences directly related to natural attractions and includes ecotourism, adventure tourism, extractive tourism, wildlife tourism and nature retreats (see [Tourism Victoria's Nature-Based Tourism Strategy](#)). Of Australia's tourism segments nature-based tourism is the most significant accounting for 62% of international and 16% of domestic overnight tourism in 2004. Nature-based tourism is the fastest growing tourism sector not only nationally, but globally.

Eco and nature-based tourists seek and expect a high level of service and product directly related to natural attractions, and they are willing to pay for it. They deliver more economic benefits than other tourists because they spend more and stay longer. For example, an international nature-based tourist spent \$6,009 per trip in 2008 compared to the average international tourist spend of \$3,747 per trip (see TRA's Nature-Based Snapshots).

## 1.8 WILDLIFE TOURISM

Australia's wildlife is a significant factor in determining the decisions of international visitors to Australia. Wildlife Tourism in Australia has an annual economic impact from international tourism exceeding several billion dollars (1997 figures). Wildlife tourism depends on a viable resource (wildlife), an interested market (tourists) and accommodating locals (hosts).

Recent Australian research on wildlife tourism examined six main areas:

- The visitor (market analysis)
- Wildlife impacts and management
- Economic values
- The interaction experience
- Host communities
- Individual species and groups of like species

Key findings include:

## **The visitor**

- Viewing wildlife is an important factor in travel decisions for 20% of international visitors and is included as a activity for over 50% of these visitors;
- Seeing wildlife in natural environments, seeing wildlife behaving naturally, and seeing rare and unusual wildlife are important factors in a wildlife experience. Good interpretation is also important factor;
- Protected areas are a major venue for wildlife interactions;
- Overall satisfaction with wildlife experiences is very high.

## **The interaction experience**

- Wildlife interaction involves a continuous spectrum of experiences form captive to free ranging, and
- This spectrum includes unguided encounters in natural areas; specialised wildlife tours; managed local attractions; nature based tours including research, conservation and educations tours involving wildlife; sightseeing tours; and accommodation and other venues that feature wildlife.

## **Wildlife impacts and management**

- Wildlife tourism can contribute positively to conservation, including financial and non-financial contributions, socio-economic incentives and education;
- For wildlife conservation to be successful, it needs to be promoted on and off protected areas and integrated into modern economies;
- Nature based tourism is one mechanism that can contribute to conservation and economic development;
- There is concern over the growing evidence that a wide range of negative impacts can and do occur, including disruption to activity, direct killing or injury and habitat alteration, and
- Long term sustainability will depend on effective management and monitoring;
- Some species may need to be excluded from tourism.

## **Economic values**

- Wildlife tourism is often free or underpriced and not marketed, which can lead to misconceptions about the value of wildlife tourism;
- The non-use values of some species exceeds their use values;
- The economic use value of wildlife tourism is estimated to account for 20-40% of international tourism expenditure;

- Tourism use of wildlife can be consumptive (e.g. fishing) or non-consumptive (i.e. viewing and interacting);
- Wildlife tourism can in some cases be more economical than producing agricultural commodities, and
- The economic contribution of wildlife tourism is an important incentive for governments to invest in conserving wildlife.

### **Host communities**

- Wildlife tourism has the potential to impact on host communities and vice versa;
- Local communities have much to offer in terms of tradition and in-depth knowledge, which can enhance the wildlife tourism experience;
- The sustainability of wildlife tourism is dependent in part on its support from the local community, and
- Factors that influence host satisfaction include the involvement of the host community and the benefits and disadvantages of wildlife tourism to them.

### **Species**

- Particular attention has been given to researching the economic and conservation impacts of wildlife tourism on kangaroos, turtles, dolphins, birds, fish whales, dingoes, and glow worms.

### **Sustainability of wildlife tourism**

Recent wildlife tourism research by the Sustainable tourism CRC has focused on assessing the sustainability of wildlife tourism through development and testing of a framework to assess the sustainability of marine wildlife tourism operations. The framework will identify potential areas of concern in relation to marine wildlife tourism interactions as well as highlight where future research and monitoring is needed.

## **2. TOURISM IN DIFFERENT ECOSYSTEMS**

Tourism occurs in almost every ecosystem in Australia including Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions, alpine areas, rangelands, forests, rivers, inlets, lakes and coastal and marine environments.

Much of the recent research undertaken by the Sustainable Tourism CRC has focused on understanding (and managing) the impacts of tourism and recreation on the structure, function and health of ecosystems, which is essential for long-term sustainability.

Visitation to the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions has experienced rapid growth over the past two decades, tourist visits to Antarctica have doubled and tourist vessels have increased from around 12 to almost 50. The number of ship-based tourists visiting Antarctica itself grew from 6,704 in 1992–93 to just over 46,000 in 2007–08. Research effort has focused on:

- understanding the important relationship between protected areas, tourism and animal and plant species;
- understanding the management implications for human-wildlife interactions, and
- the interface between visitor use and protected area management in regions facing increased visitor growth.

Aquatic areas are very important locations for Australian tourism. Marine and coastal tourism is a crucial sector of the Australian tourism industry. Over 80% of Australia's population lives close to the coast and 42% and 50% of all domestic and international tourism respectively is now marine or coastal based. The value of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park to the tourism industry is alone estimated at \$4 billion pa (see [Assessment of tourism activity in the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Region](#)). Yet, very little is known about the effects of recreation and tourism activity and tourism development on coastal, marine and aquatic ecosystems. See the 'Cruise Ship Tourism' section for more information.

Tourism and recreation is also a major activity on Australian inland water bodies and catchments and a significant contributor to local and regional economies.

Access to and protection of aquatic resources is an important issue for the tourism industry, for both consumptive and non-consumptive purposes. There are many issues surrounding **tourism and recreational access to water resources**, including:

- in Australia, recreation are generally excluded from the most important potable water supply catchments, the rationale being to absolutely minimise contamination risks;
- freshwater resources have historically been considered as factors of production and dominated by agriculture, reinforced by entrenched property rights;
- relatively little account has been given to recreation and tourism interests regardless of their growing significance as an economic and social force;
- the economic interests of other industries such as tourism and recreation remain broadly underrepresented in the policy debate;



- there has been limited trade-offs between recreation and tourism and major urban water catchments with exclusion of recreationists being the norm;
- very little is known about the water using behaviour of tourists;
- there are important historical socio-political and scientific lessons to be learnt for the history of water resource allocation; and
- the potential for the tourism industry to develop alliances with other sectors (environmental) where mutual interests coincide.

Rangeland tourism and outback tourism offer great opportunities for tourism. Self drive tourism and organised tours across Australia's rangelands and interior are growing as vehicle and communication technology and remote camping equipment improves the safety and comfort of travellers. There is also a desire to go places few have travelled and experience the majesty of the outback. Many of Australia's remote and outback tracks such as the Canning Stock Route, the [Savannah Way](#) and Tanami Road are now recording unprecedented levels of traffic. The ongoing development of Australia's National Reserve system has seen large areas of Australia's rangelands added to the protected area estate. Given the cost of maintaining a presence in these locations and undertaking essential maintenance, park management agencies have looked at the potential for tourism to contribute to the operation of these properties.