

## **Parks & Culture: Visitor Communication**

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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.

Visitor communication includes all forms of information provided to visitors prior to, during and after a visit, which can be either personal or non-personal and includes signs, brochures, fact sheets, newsletters, presentations and talks, websites, interpretation, guided tours, visitor centres, museums and displays, marketing and advertising material. **Interpretation** is a broad term given to the educational activity that seeks to bring about meaning and enriching visitor experiences (see [Natural Area Tourism](#)).

Recent research undertaken by the STCRC has focused on developing interpretation strategies to aid in the sustainability of tourism in Australia's national parks and protected areas, including research on interpretation to:

- mitigate visitor impacts;
- enhance tourist's experiences and satisfaction;
- encourage positive attitudes towards nature conservation, and
- link outcomes to corporate/strategic objectives.

Key findings include:

- interpretation and communication can be a powerful tool to mitigate the effects of visitor use on the natural environment and support management goals;
- interpretation and communication programs should be included as an important part of management goals, and
- research, monitoring and evaluation of interpretation programs is necessary for effective management.

As a result of the increasing influence of tourism, protected area management is evolving from one primarily focused around onsite management and conservation to one that more broadly encompasses a greater range of holistic recreation and tourism experiences. In dealing with this evolution, national parks and protected area managers are now required to balance onsite interpretation activities with broader marketing and demand management activities.

## 1. MARKETING

Park managers have traditionally treated marketing of national parks with some scepticism because of the perceived fears of commercial interest overwhelming national parks and consequently marketing expertise within Australian park management agencies at the planning and policy levels has been largely non-existent. Recently, marketing has been recognised as a tool for achieving park management aims including developing broad public support for parks,

developing strategic partnerships and actively promoting outdoor recreation and tourism opportunities.

Recent research by the STCRC suggests a number of opportunities exist for partnerships between protected area agencies and the tourism industry for marketing of protected areas in alignment with the following five guiding principles:

- **Responsible:** Sustainable marketing of protected areas should be designed and undertaken in a responsible, ethical manner.
- **Realistic:** To be sustainable, marketing of protected areas should be done in a manner that disseminates realistic images and information to existing and potential visitors.
- **Regional:** Sustainable marketing of protected areas should be designed and used in a regional context.
- **Research:** Research is a fundamental building block of sustainable marketing and should be carried out and integrated into marketing planning and strategies.
- **Relationships:** Cooperative relationships between relevant land management, industry and community stakeholders can benefit all.

## 2. MEASURING EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERPRETATION

Research by the STCRC has focussed on evaluating the effectiveness of interpretation including the development of an evaluation toolkit for **assessing effectiveness of face-to-face interpretive programs**. The toolkit lists **11 indicators for the evaluation of face-to-face interpretation**. The toolkit also includes three evaluation packages, each consisting of a visitor survey and a form for observing visitor behaviour.

## 3. PRE-VISIT COMMUNICATION

Pre-visit communication has become an essential part of visitor demand management and managing visitor expectations of national parks and protected areas.

Managers need to consider how tourism and recreation opportunities in national parks should be communicated to people. This requires managers to consider changing recreation demands and visitor expectations upfront and integrating marketing strategies into communication and

interpretation to promote parks effectively and to achieve more realistic expectations of what visitors can expect.

Marketing, as visitor and stakeholder communication, especially pre-visit communication, can be influential in a visitor's decision regarding where to go and what to do. Strategic and tactical communication can also influence how visitors behave by providing information in a manner that reinforces desired onsite behaviours.

Establishing experience and behavioural expectations prior to visiting a protected area is central to ultimate visitor satisfaction as well as environmental protection. In designing pre-visit communication that promotes park and protected area visitation, as well as shapes behavioural expectations, managers must have a framework with which to both plan and implement effective pre-visit communication strategies. A visitor communication framework should be based on the **Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS)** so that interpretation and communication material is relevant to the management settings and experiences being sought by the visitor.

Recent research by the STCRC highlights the importance of using a robust segmentation strategy in order to understand visitors and potential visitors and the experiences they seek. Visitor segmentation using a ROS based approach enables managers to better manage demand for parks and better manage visitor expectations about the experiences they can have. It is suggested that protected area managers would benefit from the development of a more robust approach to segmentation and to adopt a ROS based approach to understanding the interaction between visitor segments and available parks and park related experiences.

This research provides a number of recommendations for integrated pre-visit communication management (IPCM) including:

- Institute a regular IPCM audit;
- Refine pre-visit communication roles and responsibilities within the organisation and refine and clarify the roles and responsibilities of individuals and departmental groups within protected area agencies with regard to planning and implementing a pre-visit communication strategy and activities;
- Strengthen relationships with state and regional tourism organisations and develop a clear brand vision and brand identity;
- Improve the integration of visitor data into strategy development and campaign planning;
- Improve the clarity of objectives regarding which visitor segments to target and products (parks and protected areas) to market;
- Institute a more systematic and data driven pre-visit communication planning process;
- Improve the resourcing of pre-visit communication management and activities.

- Utilise the **supply and demand visitor experience segment matrix** to develop a product/segment portfolio matrix based on experiences sought by visitors.
- Undertake specific visitor segment level pre-visit decision-making research.
- Include information source and experience sought questions in visitor surveys.
- Determine the usefulness and effectiveness of park websites in facilitating visitor decision-making.

## 4. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Recent research by the STCRC in the area of strategic communication has been aimed at fostering recognition among protected area managers and tour operators that communication backed by good research can be used strategically and effectively to address onsite visitor management problems.

This research uses the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) to guide the development of effective messages that can:

- Identifying the salient beliefs of visitors underlying a particular target behaviour (e.g., littering);
- Isolating a subset of these beliefs with optimal persuasion potential and
- Targeting these beliefs in messages designed to increase compliance with the target behaviour.

The research indicates that interventions containing those messages can be effective in increasing compliance with the target behaviours.