

Parks & Culture: Visitor Managements

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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 management plays an essential role in protecting the ecological sustainability of protected areas, providing funding and business opportunities, and enabling visitors to obtain worthwhile experiences from their visit. Visitor management can be achieved in two main ways:

1. by a park agency managing destinations (i.e. parks and their sites) and by directly managing visitors (e.g. through user fees). Or it can be indirectly achieved by
2. a park agency working with the tourism industry to both protect the park and offer quality experiences for visitors, as well as generating revenue for the park. This chapter covers both.

For the first point, a range of visitor management strategies can be used including zoning, user pays, managing access and development, campsite planning and management, risk management, and spatial separation and removal of certain activities. Very often the difficulty is knowing, and then choosing which to employ (see [Natural Area Tourism](#)).

1. SITE MANAGEMENT

Successful site management involves a complexity of tasks including asset management, setting appropriate limits of use, managing visitor risk and providing the appropriate level of access and which incorporate universal access requirements.

1.1 ASSET MANAGEMENT

Recent Australian research suggests that:

- The level and nature of investment in infrastructure and services is closely related to visitor use, visitor satisfaction and the underlying objectives/purpose of management for the park.
- Visitor and asset management are inextricably linked as both impact on [‘risks to visitors’](#) and **the sustainability of a park’s natural and cultural values**;
- Knowledge of the conditions of assets is the cornerstone to developing an effective visitor risk management system;
- The provision of assets should be considered a key priority during planning phases to allow parks to provide the correct infrastructure in the right place for the main market/visitor segment;
- Parks must monitor and assess the state of assets and their use to ensure they remain relevant, safe and environmental damage is not occurring.

1.2 DESIGN

- **Sustainable tourism** design and development need to consider environmental, social, economic, cultural and experiential factors.
- Recent research undertaken by the STCRC indicates that any development, at any scale, must be informed by the natural and cultural environment in which it is situated. A sustainable tourism facility, in terms of design, is therefore location and site specific. These site-specific considerations are inextricably linked to creating an authentic sense of place, in both the destination and product.
- The sustainable design process generally follows a cyclical process of **gathering knowledge, developing concepts** and proposals and **testing** these proposals. This process accommodates the complex interactions between designers/architects, engineers, builders and managers.
- Recent Australian publications include meeting market demand, uniqueness of place, nature of the experience, access to financial resources, feasibility analysis, environmental responsibility, community support, cultural sensitivity, and control of construction and associated costs.
- From a design perspective the three most important factors are:
 - **The visitor** – the concept must meet market demand. The more the target market is understood the more likely the product will meet customer needs;
 - **The desired experience** – supplying visitors with experiences they want. Visitors are looking for experiences that are different, authentic and compelling and that evoke an emotional response.
 - **A sense of place** – the unique characteristics of a setting or place that give it value and make it a place worth visiting.

1.3 SETTING LIMITS

Increasing levels of recreational use of national parks can lead to deterioration in the natural conditions of an area and the experiences that visitors have. Carrying capacity(see [Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas](#)). In reality, the use levels an area can sustain will depend on a multitude of environmental, social and management factors and these factors will vary over time. The carrying capacity concept assumes the intrinsic character of the land base will determine how many people are too many. This approach has not been successful in solving

the problem through setting visitor limits and has led to other approaches based on achieving a set of desired social and environmental conditions for a park/location rather than one based on the question: “how many visitors is too many?”. Models based on desired outcomes like Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC), VERP and VAMP (See [‘Tourism Planning Framework’](#)) have more popular application with park managers than chasing elusive carrying capacity numbers.

1.4 UNIVERSAL ACCESS

Globally there are over 600 million people with disabilities, equating to about 10% of humanity. Approximately 20% of the Australian population, or four million people, identify as having a disability. Of these people 520,000 have a mobility disability, 480,000 are blind or vision impaired, and 1 million are deaf or hearing impaired (see [ABS Cat No. 4430.0](#)). Worldwide, the numbers of people with disabilities are set to increase due to the ageing of the population. By 2020 there will be 1.2 billion people over 60 years of age. In Australia, the ‘greying’ of the population has been well documented by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and identified by Tourism Research Australia as a market opportunity (see Queensland Government Report on Grey Nomad Tourism). This phenomenon will affect all of our major inbound markets.

Recent research completed by the STCRC on access issues for visitors in the tourism sector indicates that:

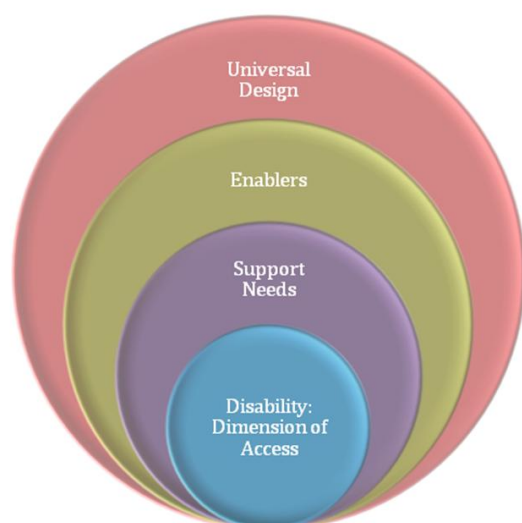
- The relationship between disability and ageing is clearly evident and both present a challenge for the tourism industry;
- Some 88% of people with a disability take a holiday each year, accounting for over 8.2 million overnight trips

Current research suggests that developing inclusive industry practices to people with disabilities and seniors requires a knowledge of four concepts:

1. types or **dimensions of disability** (refers to the range of disabilities that are catered for in a particular location or circumstance) – mobility, hearing, vision, cognitive and other dimensions;
2. levels of support needs – whether a person can interact independently or whether they have low, medium, high or very high support needs;
3. access enablers – personal aides, communication and assistive technologies used by individuals to maximise participation; and
4. universal design – where environments are designed to universally include people of all ages, genders, sizes and abilities.

As shown in Figure 1 (below), these four interdependent and overlapping concepts form the basis of a comprehensive understanding of how to accommodate visitors to protected areas and in outdoor recreation activities and indeed apply to all forms of tourism. There is a complex interplay between the individual and the environment. At one or more of these interfaces, people can become marginalised through a series of structural constraints that may require a management response to provide universal solutions.

Figure 1: Four interdependent market concepts



Source: Small, J., & Darcy, S. (2010). Tourism, Disability and Mobility. In S. Cole & N. Morgan (Eds.), *Tourism and Inequality: Problems and Prospects* (pp. 11-31). Wallingford: CABI

Other Australian research on universal access to outdoor settings in an urban environment suggests that (based on a case study of major tourist destinations in Sydney, Australia):

- Most of the main experiences (popular accessible destination experiences) are only suitable for one **dimension of disability access** with some being appropriate for two and a small number of experiences being appropriate for all dimensions of access;
- Most visitors seek information before they travel to a major city or before they visit an attraction. The internet is identified as a growing source of information;
- Information availability, detail and accuracy can be a significant constraint to travel. It is the way in which information is conveyed, which can present a constraint, and
- Website accessibility is critical to inclusive organisational practice. For example, font sizes, font colours, contrast, page backgrounds and page design can all present a barrier to people with a vision impairment.

An important component of designing pedestrian access in protected areas involves meeting the Australian standards for [Walking Track Classification \(AS2156\)](#). Class 1 walking trails are wheelchair accessible and conform to Australian Standard AS1428 (design for access and mobility series, provides design requirements for buildings encompassing the specific needs of people with disabilities).

1.5 VISITOR RISK MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC LIABILITY

Parks agencies are responsible for the care, control and management of national parks and other protected areas, and are viewed in legal terms as the occupiers of these areas, even though they do not hold any estate or interest in real property. National parks and other natural areas contain inherent risks. Many of the associated recreational activities increase the level of exposure to risk for visitors. Parks agencies, as occupiers of these lands and waters, have a duty to take reasonable care to avoid foreseeable risks of injury to visitors and as occupiers, they may be liable for injuries suffered by visitors if they breach their duty of care.

A best practice approach to **visitor risk management** includes risk identification; the prioritisation of risk; implementation of control measures to minimise risk; monitoring of control measures to evaluate their effectiveness; and the follow-up response of risk assessment to gauge the degree of risk experienced (see Chapter 6 of [Nature-Based Tourism, Environment and Land Management](#)).

2. TOURISM OPERATIONS, OPERATORS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Tour operators provide important services to visitors and protected area managers including the delivery of visitors, the collection of fees and the communication of conservation messages through interpretation. Research indicates that many tour operators are small businesses that face a multitude of barriers and thus require support to grow and develop. Partnerships between protected area managers and tourism operators can improve communication, reduce barriers and foster mutual understanding, respect and cooperation. Tourism certification is an example of a partnership that has enabled many operators to make social and economic contributions to local communities through employment, training and the purchase of local goods and services.

2.1 LEASING AND LICENSING

Permits, licences and leases (collectively referred to as concessions) when used in conjunction with [‘planning’](#) and [‘management frameworks’](#) can be effective in reducing visitor impacts in high use and sensitive areas, providing satisfying experiences for visitors, separating potentially conflicting activities, encouraging responsible behaviour, and providing assistance in collection of visitor and management data (see [Managing Protected Areas](#)).

Recent research into some of the issues affecting licensed nature tour operations in Australian protected areas indicate:

- The frustrations of the nature tourism industry with state licensing requirements, while present, are not extreme;
- The licensing framework for nature tour operators within each state involves multiple state government agencies each with their own set of licensing procedures;
- Due to the fragmented nature of the current licensing system, compliance costs on those being regulated is high. While the compliance costs associated with each individual licence may be small, cumulatively they are an impediment to business especially when added to the other forms of regulation impacting businesses;
- Many tour operators are small businesses. This may contribute to some tour operators not appreciating the reasons behind the licensing framework or lacking the business skills to efficiently address compliance with government regulation;
- A shift from a one-way communication dominated model to a more collaborative problem solving approach would contribute to tour operators being regarded as partners rather than adversaries or problem makers. A requirement of collaborative approaches is that all parties (e.g. agencies and tour operators) are willing to invest time and energy in building and maintaining strong working relationships. Some of the licensing agencies have already started to embrace two-way communication and relationship building with nature tour operators;
- Over time, a greater focus on agency-industry relationship building will aid in breaking down barriers arising from any negative stereotypes held by agencies or operators. A mutual understanding of the different costs and benefits licensing creates for each party will help build these relationships. ([link to partnerships section](#)); and
- Licensing can play an important role in ensuring that increased pressure from nature tourism does not unacceptably impact on conservation values. If conflict is to be minimised, decisions regarding the number of licences and how they will be allocated will need to be transparent, equitable, and supported by good science.

2.2 OPERATOR SUSTAINABILITY

In the past three decades the popularity of nature-based activities has increased (see Chapter 15 in [Quality Assurance and Certification in Ecotourism](#)). Due to today's urbanised society there is a growing tendency to access outdoor experiences through commercial providers. This demand has generated massive growth in the establishment of tour operations in most Australian states and territories.

A number of factors influence the sustainability of this sector. One of the key factors is the characteristic of the nature-based operator. Recent research completed by the STCRC indicates these businesses are typified by a number of features that suggest firms in this sector need help. These features include:

- Largely micro businesses (average size is 6 FTE staff);
- Inadequate resources (particularly marketing);
- Owner-operators with little or no formal business or tourism training;
- Many businesses are marginal and seek a second income to keep their business operational;
- Motivation for being in business is often 'lifestyle' reasons;
- Drop out rate for failed businesses is high (100s enter and leave each year and average lifespan is 10 years);
- Feelings of isolation; and
- Led by individuals who are fiercely independent.

2.3 PARTNERSHIPS

In Australia, the value of and need for park/tourism partnerships and their potential contribution to sustainable tourism have been identified in a number of recent reports (see [Natural Tourism Partnerships Action Plan](#) and the [Tourism White Paper – Plus](#)).

Australian research undertaken by the STCRC has found that:

- The last decade has seen increasing recognition of the importance of national parks (See 'Value of Parks') and protected areas to tourism in Australia and elsewhere.
- At the same time the resources available to provide and manage tourism in relative terms has declined.
- Consequently, partnerships between the tourism industry and protected area agencies have developed with mutual benefits to park agencies, the private sector and local

communities; enhanced tourism opportunities; and increased resources for protected area management.

- The most important outcomes from partnerships were improved understanding of protected area values, biodiversity conservation, greater respect for culture, and increased social benefits to local communities.
- Partners were satisfied with the economic gains from the partnership and the improved competitiveness of the protected area as a tourism destination.
- There is clear evidence of the ability of partnerships to value-add to protected area tourism.
- Although partners were generally satisfied with other outcomes, they expected more from the partnerships than they were currently getting.

2.4 TOURISM CERTIFICATION

Tourism business certification is a voluntary procedure that assesses, monitors, and gives written assurance that a business, product, process, service, or management system conforms to specific requirements. It establishes the extent to which a business offering tourism experiences meets industry nominated standards. A marketable logo or seal is awarded to those meeting or exceeding the baseline standards.

There are a number of certification schemes relating to environmental performance in the tourism industry. These are commonly referred to as 'ecolabels', which are schemes relating principally to the environment.

The idea of certification is consumers can use the information or good practice implied by the label to assist their purchasing decisions. On behalf of consumers, certification labels set out to define, compile, test and summarize the environmental performance of competing products in a readily recognisable symbol (see [Nature-Based Tourism, Environment and Land Management](#)).

Certification may also be used as a criterion by regulatory agencies to determine the granting of permits, by promotion agencies for inclusion in marketing campaigns, and by insurance underwriters to issue policies and set premiums. Indeed, many certification and award schemes are not aimed at the consumer at all, and act rather as a management process to improve quality and productivity as well as environmental management processes.

The most well-known environmental certification programs in Australian tourism include [Earthcheck](#), Ecotourism Australia's [Eco Certification](#), and the Blue Flag (a European scheme measuring the quality of swimming water at beaches). Green Globe 21, the precursor to Earthcheck, was one of the first schemes to create an ecolabel applicable to all forms of tourism. It focuses on management issues such as water conservation, recycling, energy

consumption and waste minimisation. The strength of the program is its benchmarking capability, individualised for a number of industry sectors, allowing a business to compare its environmental performance with others in the same sector.

Recent Australian research undertaken by the STCRC indicates that:

- consumer awareness of tourism certification programs is low;
- the most well known program is the National Tourism Accreditation Program;
- poor recognition of certification and associated labelling indicates that tourists are not greatly influenced by them;
- few tourists consider ecolabeling in their tourism product choice nor believe that they mean the product is worthy of receiving higher payments.

The Eco Certification Program is based on the principles of ‘eco-tourism’ and was developed to address the needs of genuine nature and ecotourism operators. Many of the principles of eco certification are consistent with the management objectives of protected areas. Certification programs do not meet all the standards required of tour operators by protected area managers. To assist managers develop certification programs relevant to the needs of protected areas, a set of principles have been developed by protected area managers for managing commercial tour operators in protected areas(see Chapter 15 in [Quality Assurance and Certification in Ecotourism](#))

3. USER PAYS SCHEMES

Virtually all protected area agencies in Australia have adopted some form of user-pays system. Park agencies are becoming increasingly reliant on visitor fees as the demand for recreation and tourism in parks rises and the cost of providing facilities and services exceeds the level of government funding.

Recent research in Australia and worldwide suggests that:

- A one-size fits all (nationally consistent) approach to user pays in Australia is not a viable option, due to differences in legislation, social and political contexts and management structures between Australian States and Territories;
- ‘Good practice’ user pays methods should be employed to ensure the objectives of park agencies can be met on a long term basis, these include:
 - conduct pre-emptive positive public relations exercises prior to fees introduction or increases;
 - ensure timely notification to operators regarding irregular or large fee variations;

- ensure staff are competent in financial management and motivated to actively manage the system; this may require training or hiring of appropriately skilled staff;
- retain revenue for parks or districts where fees are collected
- adopt a simple user fees structure and easy access to related passes and payment of fees
- employ a business management approach to user-pays systems
- use a discretionary approach to enforcement of compliance with acceptance of a certain level of non-compliance
- use technology where possible to improve efficiency of user-pays systems, including online reporting by regional staff, EFTPOS and credit card payment systems and online fully automated payment systems.
- few park managers keep accurate records of the cost of operating their user-pays systems, and
- there is still a limited understanding of the costs and benefits (both tangible and intangible) of user-pays systems.

4. ZONING SCHEMES

Zoning schemes provide a spatial differentiation of protected areas based on different **objectives of management**. In Western Australia, four different zones are widely applied in national parks: special conservation, wilderness, natural environment and recreation. Special conservation zones have high nature conservation values and may be closed to public use. Recreation zones are generally limited in extent and accommodate a broad range of outdoor recreation opportunities and related facilities in ways that do not compromise natural and landscape values and are safe and convenient for visitors. Recreation is also facilitated in **wilderness zones** and **natural environment zones** but at much lower intensities and levels of facilities.