Parks & Culture: Visitor Planning

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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 planning involves a range of tasks and activities that are best developed through a management or visitor planning process. Visitor planning encompasses two key areas of management:

1. controlling and limiting the impacts of visitor use; and
2. maximising visitor experiences through appropriate activities, education and interpretation.

1. MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORKS AND SETTINGS

Park agencies worldwide are faced with increasing demands for their facilities and services coupled with declining finances and human resources, which poses many management challenges. The ability to develop more comprehensive, relevant park management and decision making systems to facilitate efficient, effective allocation of resources has become increasingly important. Recent research by the Sustainable Tourism CRC on strategic park management has focussed on:

- evaluating best practice and management benchmarks for the strategic management of protected areas, and
- developing a framework guiding park management agencies in the strategic management of protected areas.

The following protected area matrix provides one possible framework for guiding park agencies in the strategic management of protected areas. It is labelled as an 'integrated park management model' and describes the conceptual relationship between managing tourism/recreation (a service orientation) and managing the conservation values of parks. In the matrix below, the X axis measures environmental value where the higher the environmental value, the greater the need to protect natural assets. The Y axis measures human value where higher human value implies a greater emphasis on servicing visitor needs.

Figure 4: Park management framework
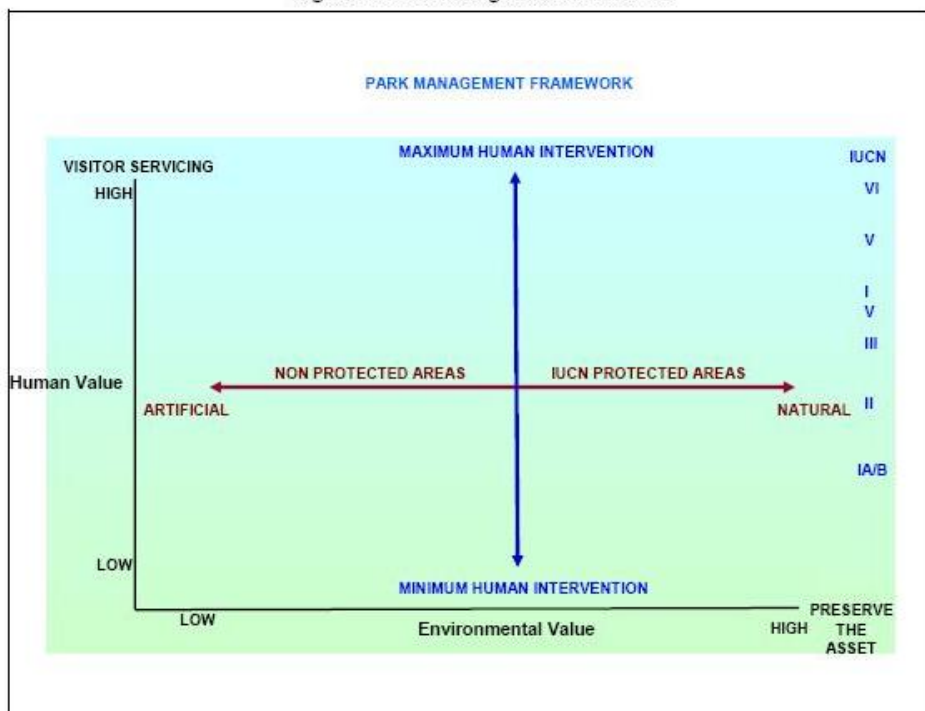
Source: Inglis et al, 2005, Best Practice in Strategic Park Management, Sustainable Cooperative Research Centre

It draws on the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) classification of parks, which takes into account both environmental significance and the volume of human visitation. The IUCN provides a 6 level global protected area management category. Recreation and tourism are purposes that are accommodated in all except one of the IUCN categories. There are 56 different types of terrestrial protected area and 17 types of marine protected area across Australia reflecting the diversity of purposes for their establishment. While most park agencies in Australia use the IUCN system to classify national parks and protected areas, there is a lack of consistent sub-classifications or specific use purposes identified for parks with high visitor use such as urban, regional and recreational parks and some national parks. A consistent classification system across all park types, based on sound scientific research, would help ensure a sustainable park system.

As such, these IUCN categories underpin the proposed integrated park management model.

Four quadrants are apparent from the matrix suggesting a 'prototype' classification system for parks in Australia:

1. **High Use Urban Parks,** with a strong emphasis on servicing visitors and less emphasis on ecological integrity. Examples in Victoria include Kings Park and Albert Park.
2. **Low Use Urban Parks,** with a limited emphasis on both servicing visitors and ecological integrity. For example, low-grade regional parks and reserves.
3. **High Use Protected Areas,** with a strong emphasis on both ecological integrity and servicing visitors. Examples in Victoria include Phillip Island Nature Park and the Victorian Alps.
4. **Low Use Protected Areas,** with a high emphasis on ecological integrity and less emphasis on servicing visitors. Examples in Victoria include the Little Desert and Hattah-Kulkyne National Parks.

At a destination or site level in Western Australia, park managers develop **visitor management settings.** These are based on the ROS (Recreation Opportunity Spectrum) and combine an understanding of visitors and their needs (i.e. the needs and wants of visitors that use these settings) with the biophysical capabilities of the site to classify and then manage recreation sites as setting classes. These setting classes then determine the appropriate level of site development.

2. TOURISM MODELLING

The development of tourism models is a recent phenomenon. The aims of such models are prediction, with the ability to predict depending on the quality of both the model and the data used to make the predictions. **Tourism models** with the capacity to predict or evaluate particular actions or events gives park and tourism managers a useful management tool to test management scenarios. The Ningaloo Destination Model is a **scenario-planning tool** for assessing the social, environmental and economic impacts of tourism planning strategies to assist tourism planning in a region reliant on its unique natural attractions.

Protected areas are often established on the basis of a few key sites possessing exceptional biological and/or physical attributes. These sites tend to become the focus of visitor activities, with the natural and built features around them serving to funnel visitors to these special areas within parks. As a result, visitors are not evenly spread throughout a protected area.

Within a protected area, there is typically very little information available on which sites receive the highest visitor numbers and why. A preliminary predictive model of the spatial distribution of visitors within a protected area, the **Tourism Pressure Index**, has been developed. Its aim is to develop a user-friendly model for assessing the relative importance of numerous sites within a protected area. Ultimately, the model should provide protected area managers with a

standardised, semi-quantitative basis for decision making with respect to the management of their visitors.

Modelling has also been done to predict the different impacts of different visitor numbers and patterns of use. The best known is the **Recreation Behaviour Simulator (RBSim)**, applied in Australia by Parks Victoria and affiliated researchers. RBSim simulates the behaviour of visitors in a high use park (in Victoria it was applied to Port Campbell National Park and the Bay of Islands Coastal Park). It allows managers to explore different management options, such as increasing visitor numbers, providing new facilities and then determining the impacts on the natural environment and other visitors.

3. TOURISM TRENDS AND KEY CONCEPTS

Understanding the visitor and their ever-changing needs is fundamental to tourism planning. Having historical visitor data and understanding global and local trends in tourism and society is important for effective planning. Predictive tools (such as 'tourism models') that have the capability of storing and analysing large amounts of data can assist visitor planning and management.

Visitor planning generally involves a number of well-accepted planning elements. A range of 'tourism planning frameworks' (planning concepts) have been developed that can assist in effective visitor planning at the site level.

3.1 COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN PLANNING

In Australia and other developed countries, community members and other stakeholders have an expectation that they will be involved in tourism and recreation planning for protected areas. Furthermore, recent research by the Sustainable Tourism CRC shows that communities can develop high levels of attachment to places including national parks and other protected areas. This research indicates that:

- The identification of locations with protected areas represent important attachments for a range of users and this helps to identify significant historic, cultural and natural resources;
- Understanding attachment to place allows park managers to make informed decisions about appropriate long term balance between use and protection, and
- Protection and interpretation of such places help form part of a community's regional identity and character.

Recent research also suggests a range of benefits and costs of involving stakeholders in visitor planning (see Natural Area Tourism). Some benefits include:

- The potential for better decisions;
- Increased accountability;
- Stakeholder acceptance, local community empowerment and
- Clarifying visitor preferences.

Some of the costs of community involvement include:

- Requires more time and staff, and
- The potential to lose control of the planning process.

Fundamental to achieving stakeholder involvement in the management of protected areas for conservation and recreation and tourism outcomes are the processes of 'governance' and in particular the decision making approaches within the 'planning process'. While park planning is guided by legislation, most is flexible enough to incorporate **inclusive deliberative processes** that facilitate information and knowledge transfer, engender ownership and encourage participation and involvement in plan implementation.

Tour operators in protected areas need to have certainty about how a national park, group of parks or state-wide park system will be managed. Significant changes to national park policy and park management practices and operations can have **significant operational and financial impacts on tourism operations, local communities and related businesses**. As such, there are good economic and equity reasons for including the tourism industry in decision making that is likely to affect their livelihoods. Such inclusion can also help park managers better understand the implications of their decisions and actions, contribute to better decisions and more efficient operations, and help **build trust and relationships between operators** and park managers.

3.2 PLANNING FOR TOURISM IN PROTECTED AREAS

National parks and other protected areas that accommodate recreation and tourism require a plan that describes how tourism and related development will be managed. Planning for tourism is no easy task. Planners need to take into account the seemingly conflicting roles of nature conservation and public use and enjoyment. If managed effectively, tourism planning can be the catalyst for engaging stakeholders and communities in managing and protecting parks that provide sustainable economic and social tourism benefits.

Management plans describe the goals and objectives for a park, consistent with a park agency's legislation and policies. They convert the general parks legislation into management policies and actions. Management Plans generally have a life span of 10 years and involve public consultation and notification. Recently, management plans have become important tools in evaluating management effectiveness (See 'Visitor Monitoring and Research').

Tourism management plans can take different forms and may be a stand-alone document (also known as visitor services plan, tourism plan or visitor strategy) that is a subset of a park management plan or is incorporated into a park management plan. Or, they may address tourism management of lands (and waters) of various tenures beyond a single national park (e.g. Tourism Optimisation Management Model as used for managing tourism on Kangaroo Island, South Australia). Management plans are usually an articulation of policies, goals, objectives, decisions and strategies for managing a specific park or group of parks (see Tourism in National Parks and Protected Areas and Best Practice in Protected Area Management Planning).

An important aspect of designing a tourism planning process is to adopt procedures that are understandable, defendable and transparent. **Stakeholder involvement and public participation and consultation** are essential components of the planning process (see Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas).

Recent research and scholarly advice suggests that there are seven key elements (guidelines) to successful planning.

- **Clarity in plan production** – states how the plan will be produced, implemented and resourced and the timeframe for implementation and review
- **Implementation oriented** – indicates roles and responsibilities and identifies and involves local communities and others in the implementation process
- **Socially acceptable** – input from a wide range of interest, using consensus building processes and technical expertise.
- **Mutual learning oriented** – involve techniques that encourage social learning with two-way transfer of knowledge between planners, scientists, community and other stakeholders. Understand the impacts of decisions and actions/inactions.
- **Responsibility and shared ownership** – use a range of 'community involvement' techniques, encourage public participation and create responsibilities for stakeholder groups.
- **Representative of a wide range of interests** – the plan should embody a wide range of values, views and interests
- **Relationship building oriented** – use the process to strengthen relationships, secure community commitment and build support.

More contemporary forms of planning are emerging to guide the management of protected areas. Approaches include governance arrangements facilitating community and stakeholder involvement in planning, including **deliberative inclusive processes** that suggest collaborative, decentralised forms of **governance** (see Transforming Parks and Protected Areas).

Planning guidelines have been produced for special areas such as **National Heritage Sites** and **World Heritage sites** to meet their specific requirements (see Management Planning for World Heritage Properties).

3.3 RECREATION AND TOURISM TRENDS

Strategic planning and management of parks and protected areas is a complex process. It is important that protected area planners and managers understand past, **present and future trends** in order to design park systems that will be relevant and sustainable for the future. Trends need to be considered at several levels:

- **Major worldwide trends affecting tourism** at a global and national level; including **long term economic, social, political and environmental trends.**
- **Trends affecting tourism in protected areas**.
- **Specific trends affecting protected areas**, such as 'climate change', governance, involvement of Indigenous communities, biodiversity initiatives, visitation trends, and sustainability.

Recent national and international research suggest the **present and future trends in protected area tourism include**:

- Park visitation will increase;
- Park tourism leads to increased public participation and ultimately collaboration;
- Increasing education levels in society lead to demands for increasing sophistication in park management and park services;
- A population shift in the developed world towards increasing numbers of older citizens results in significant change in activities, settings and experiences sought by visitors;
- Increased accessibility of information technology means that potential, current and past visitors will be better informed and knowledgeable about what leisure opportunities exist, the current state of management and the consequences of management actions;
- Increasing availability of information technology profoundly influences park visitation;
- Advances in the technology of travel and reductions in costs result in increased demand for park and protected area opportunities distant from one's residence;
- The increase in park area, number of parks, and park visitation exceeds the capability of many protected area agencies;

- Park management will shift gradually from government agency structures, with centralised financial control, to parastatal forms, with flexible financial management.
- Park management funding will increasingly shift from government-consolidated funds to park tourism fees and charges. This results in a greater focus on visitor management.
- Protected area agencies develop increased sophistication in their understanding and management of park visitation and tourism;
- The world's international travel will be strongly affected by decreasing supplies of oil and gas and large increases in energy cost in the second decade of the 21st century, and
- Parks increasingly recognised as cultural icons.

Information about the rates of participation in outdoor recreation (including spatial and temporal distribution) is an important aspect of recreation and tourism planning.

3.4 TOURISM PLANNING AND FRAMEWORK

The degree to which a protected area can sustain tourism and recreation is dependent on the **physical environment**, the **behaviour of visitors** and **appropriate management** and resourcing.

A number of planning concepts and frameworks have been developed over the last 30 years to assist park managers in providing quality experiences for visitors while at the same time minimising their impacts. The **Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS)** is a widely accepted system for providing a range of recreational experiences, based on the precept that a range of different settings offering different experiences is integral to good park management (see Managing Protected Areas: A Global Guide).

Other related frameworks such as the **Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC)**, the **Visitor Impact Model (VIM)** and the **Tourism Optimization Management Model (TOMM)** identify the desired social and environmental conditions, ideally in consultation with stakeholders, and establish indicators as part of the process. While these three frameworks focus mostly on visitors, the **Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP)** planning framework places visitor planning in the broader context of management planning and considers, as well as visitors, the area's natural resources and associated values and threats.

The LAC, ROS and VIM planning frameworks are all based on answering the question: "how much change is acceptable?" rather than the impossible-to-answer question – "how much use is too much?". Pursuing the latter question often leads to the unsuccessful pursuit of a single number or numbers for recreation carrying capacity. Research over 20 years has shown that it is very difficult if not impossible to determine recreation carrying capacity. In contrast, a focus on

monitoring change and then acting when it becomes unacceptable (to managers/stakeholders) has a much better chance of success (see Natural Area Tourism).

These types of frameworks contribute to **Experience Based Management (EBM)**. Rather than focusing on what people do EBM techniques seek to understand the relationship between how, why and where visitors recreate. Therefore management focuses on providing a mix of recreation opportunities targeting desired experiences, rather than providing opportunities for specific activities.

An extension of ROS and LAC is the concept of **Levels of Service (LOS)** adopted by Parks Victoria. For Parks Victoria this strategic approach underpins the provision and management of visitor facilities and services. The LOS approach determines the most appropriate level of visitor facility or service to be provided in a particular location or park based a range of considerations including visitor type, site uniqueness, visitation levels and visitation growth, economic contribution to the park, local and regional economy, length of stay and the cost/benefit of site development. LOS allows all parks to be rated according to 3 levels: state/national, regional or local importance. A similar approach to LOS is the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service's Reserves Standards Framework (RSF) that recognises the need to integrate four essential elements of visitor planning; visitor needs, visitor risk management, asset management and resource allocation. Once data is collected and analysed and a level of service assigned, this information can be communicated to visitors who can make informed choices about recreation venues that align with the type of experience they seek.

Table 18: Supply and demand visitor experience matrix

Visitor Markets		Recreation Opportunity Spectrum							
Clark & Stankey (1979)		Modern		Semi-Modern		Semi-Primitive		Primitive	
Eagles & McCool (2002)		Urban		Rural	Roaded Natural	Semi-Primitive Motorised	Semi-Primitive Non-Motorised	Primitive	
NZ Department of Conservation (1996)		Urban	Urban Fringe	Rural	Back Country Drive-In	Back Country 4x4 Drive-In	Back Country Walk-In	Remote	Wilderness
Worboys, Lockwood & De Lacy (2005) — QLD		Urban		Intensive	Natural	Semi-Remote Motorised	Semi-Remote Non-Motorised	Remote	
Worboys, Lockwood & De Lacy (2005) — VIC		Developed		Semi-Developed	Roaded Natural	Semi-Remote		Remote	
Worboys, Lockwood & De Lacy (2005) — NSW				Class 5	Class 4	Class 3	Class 2	Class 1	
Parks Victoria	Department of Conservation	Urban		Front Country				Back Country	
Urban Socials		*	*						
Trail Users		*	*						
Access Made Easy / Nature Admirers	Short-Stop Travellers		*	*	*				
Passive and Other Users	Day Visitors			*	*	*	*		
Country Vacationers	Over Nighters			*	*				
	Back Country Comfort Seekers					*	*		
	Back Country Adventurers						*	*	
	Remoteness Seekers							*	*
Activity Centrics^	Thrill Seekers*	^	*^	*^	*^	*	*	*	*

Source: Mike Reid, Stephen Wearing and Glen Croy 2008 Marketing of Protected Areas as a Tool to Influence Visitors' Pre-Visit Decisions, Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre

At the site or destination level, good tourism planning considers and plans for the destination with an explicit acknowledgment of the status and potential of the broader tourism region and other external factors and influences likely to affect the destination's tourism opportunities. The 5

A's of tourism planning is a widely known approach for evaluating the ingredients essential for successfully developing a **tourism destination.**

These are:

- Access
- Attractions
- Accommodation
- Amenities
- Awareness

A brief description of these attributes and why they are important follows (see [Designing Tourism Naturally: A Review of the World's Best Practice in Wilderness Lodges and Tented Safari Camps.](#))

Access: This includes moving visitors from their origin to and within the destination. Access also includes having suitable transport services and infrastructure to meet market needs, including airstrips and airports, wharfs and ports and appropriate forms of ground transport.

Attractions: These are things of value that motivate people to travel to another location. Attractions can be natural, cultural, scenic or events related. They also include activities that can be undertaken including walking, snorkelling or relaxing. On the reverse side, if a destination has negative features these need to be minimised or removed. For example, unsightly rubbish, polluted beaches or poor environmental management are likely to deter visitors.

Accommodation: Most destinations require a range of accommodation needs (styles, quality and prices) to meet different market needs, experiences and preferences. Building the right facility to match the dominant markets is important. Accommodation types include hotels, backpacker hotels, bed and breakfast, camping grounds, resorts, lodges and safari camps.

Amenities: This includes any other service that is required to meet the needs of the visitor including signs, retail shopping, restaurants and cafes, tourist information centres, government services (e.g. customs and immigration), telecommunications (e.g. internet, mobile phone) public toilets and emergency services (e.g. medical centres and hospitals).

Awareness: Strong and effective marketing campaigns are essential for building destination awareness and branding. The local destination community must also have an awareness of the value of tourism, be positive about what it has to offer and train its frontline tourism staff and industry employers to have a positive attitude to tourists. A perceived lack of community support for tourism can have severe consequences for a tourism destination.