

Submission to the Ministerial Task Force into Tourism and NSW National Parks

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In recent years the funding of parks has been reduced relative to previous funding and protected area responsibility, and pushed onto revenue raising sources such as recreation and tourism. This has created a range of major problems associated with protected area planning and management in Australia. The

need to raise revenue has given rise to

pressures to increase park visitation which

has needed additional levels of regulation. However no increase in resourcing has come in the area of education and training to achieve this. Some commentators (cf Dearden & Rollins 1993) have noted the reliance of park management on strategies that limit and/or control visitor behaviour; these strategies can be seen as a product of the educational background of parks rangers and senior policy makers, an education that has its foundation in the biological sciences (cf Magill 1988, 1991, 1992). Within the constraints of publicly-available resources, parks managers have established their professional expertise around such functions as identification and classification of fauna and flora species (ie a stocktaking) and site maintenance, site monitoring, policing of visitor use, (ie playing a gate-keeper role). In recent years, the function has been expanded to include some visitor education and the application of various land classification systems on the basis of appropriate use rather than species. There is evidence that park managers are only reasonably

competent at perceiving what experiences and values are important to tourists and visitors in general (Wellman et al 1982; Clark et al 1971; Hendee et al 1974; Twight and Catton 1975; Twight and Lyden 1989) and that they believe that visitors do not know what forests and parks are about, and they are the experts who know best. However, knowledge about park visitors, their needs and how they should be managed is not systematically developed and such capacity has tended to be held by those in head or corporate officers but not typically among field staff.

The managers as a sub-cultural segment of staff often decide much of the presumed appropriate use for the park. This set of appropriate activities is then transferred into the managerial context when implementing strategies for park management. An example is the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) (Clark and Stankey, 1979; Stankey and Wood, 1979) which functions as a system of classification of leisure and tourism experiences and is used extensively in park management and so transferred across a range of parks and organisational cultures. This systematic classification of settings is based on the manager's perception of the park setting and its appropriate use, so the attitude of a manager to the tourist may become a part of the management system and serve to reinforce the stereotype of the tourist held by the manager. This means the manager does not have a passive role but is creating the underlying structure of the tourist experience and thereby influencing it to a significant degree.

Park managers as public servants and professionals should be seeking to serve and educate the public. They need to respond to the needs and interests of visitors acting as facilitators and providers of these experiences rather than prescribing or constructing meanings and subsequent 'appropriate uses' for these settings within their own value frameworks. They cannot do this without comprehensive support for training and education in the areas of visitor management supported by the funding of courses that achieve this. This area has no centre of excellence in NSW or Australia and no specifically funded CRC or dedicated specialist degrees or short courses that assist in achieving this, although a small number of individual efforts have been made to include this aspect within wider programs (eg the National School in Park Management through the University of Melbourne; Parks, Recreation and Heritage at Charles Sturt University, and one short course in management at the University of South Australia; two held by the School of Leisure, Sport

and Tourism at the University of Technology, Sydney).

If we take for example the area of marketing of protected areas, Jenkins and McArthur (1996) note that the focus within parks agencies is a preoccupation with the supply side and ignores any potential to ensure long term preservation of key natural sites through manipulation of the demand side. The traditional approach adopted by parks managers can also be seen as a largely reactive one because parks managers essentially wait until visitors enter a national park before taking (any) action to manage their behaviour.

The approach is also similar to the one traditionally adopted by providers of some other state-provided public goods, for example, health and police services. The police services in each of the state and territories in Australia have typically established their professional expertise around the development of an effective and efficient response function; that is, taking action upon notification of a crime being committed and the investigation of a crime. Less attention has been given to deterrence, through activities such as patrolling and community education. In recent years, police services, corporate plans have reflected some desire to reallocate more resources to 'proactive policing' by working more collaboratively with the community in identifying high risk groups and high risk areas and then minimise the risk of crime being committed: hence the use of the terms 'problem-oriented policing' or 'community policing.' There is a growing recognition of the need to tackle the social and environmental problems that underlie the incidence of crime just as there is to examine the social context of parks and their use.

As marketers appreciate, the supply of a natural resource cannot easily be varied in response to demand. In a quantitative sense (ie visitor numbers), the supply of a natural resource is fixed whilst demand varies largely according to the influence of societal forces. This is unlike the production of goods where production can more easily be varied in accordance with demand. Further, strategies designed to respond to variations in qualitative demand (ie visitor user type) are capital and/or labour intensive to implement.

The available supply (capacity) is somewhat a notional one, as those parks managers responsive for making decisions about appropriate use in the face of strong demand attest (cf Wearing & Brock 1991). This is unlike a number of other tourist services such as hotels and airlines which have fixed room night and passenger capacity respectively.

Visitor demand for key natural areas is only likely to grow. There is much evidence showing the increased awareness of Australia's natural attributes amongst international and domestic tourists for instance. The growing population density in and around Australia's capital cities, accompanying infrastructure and property development and the increasingly frenetic pace of life

underlie the need for increasing numbers of city dwellers to escape city life in their leisure time, seeking more natural, tranquil experiences. The growing pressure on our national parks is not therefore surprising and is not likely to abate. The question is how is it to be managed?

Tourist operators have been conditioned to cater for tourists in a particular way, largely through traditional economies of scale: brochures, throughput, coach travel. Thus tourists have been conditioned to interact with the surrounding environment in only a superficial way with tourists wanting only to consume in a convenient way. Park managers' primary function is the preservation of the asset—these two



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approaches are often considered to be diametrically opposed. This would appear to reflect the attitudes commonly held by the community, and often use pressures on national parks can be seen as just a microcosm of societal trends.

A number of views on marketing of national parks have been published. Middleton (1998) for example, advocates an approach that involves segmenting the tourism market and actively targeting the conservation-conscious end of the market. Current national parks policy documents reflect at least some desire to redress the current approaches and examine approaches such as this (NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service 1997).

In recent years national parks authorities have also shown signs of a desire to be more outwardly-focused and more accurately reflect community needs and expectations. Corporate plans reflect a desire to establish a more market driven strategic direction, involving strategic partnerships with tourism bodies, more active promotion of recreation and tourism opportunities, and

a more conscious effort to provide clear parameters in terms of public use of natural lands. The difficulty arises in transforming policy to action—difficulties with for instance the educational background of the managers who apply the policies, the organisational culture that is focused on preservation and the incomplete understanding of tourism.

This inquiry represents an opportunity to establish a change in the paradigm. Parks agencies may well require a new approach with education and training providing a movement away from isolated approaches focused on preservation, actions that exploit the expertise of parks staff but also educate them of results beyond those perceived as reactionary and within the traditional organisational culture of parks. 'Offsite' community promotion and education could form a substantial component of time (information-transfer, interpretation, guiding). Ongoing negotiation with tourist industries needs to occur, acknowledging its abilities as well as its shortcomings.

One may well ask how well placed National Parks authorities are to implement policy change. It is often the case that those involved in writing corporate/strategic plans are the most outwardly-focused in the organisation but lack of strategic fit between the organisation and its environment; systems of resource allocation, structures, operational planning, staff competencies, and reward systems that support the strategic direction of the organisation (six box model). Strategic plans must also go some way to resolving in-built conflict between, in this case, tourism marketing objectives and preservation objectives. These should not be left to staff in ranger positions but should allow them to have some input into the approaches generated.

With this strategic approach in place the refocussing to be customer-orientated and skilling existing managers in this area while ensuring that educational institutions that are drawn on for staffing, and are providing training in this area, will ensure that there is change. The service's professional staff needs to have not only the social science skills to deal with people but the skills to understand the tourism industry and the tourist. If this is provided, the barriers can be broken down and more effective approaches to the tourism industry and the management of tourists can be achieved. With this, managers may be able to engage the tourism industry and the tourist

to enable a dialogue that could see changes made in approaches to management. If this occurs management of parks can look forward to an interesting and exciting future of interaction with tourism with adequate support provided via the NSW Government for training and education in this area.

In order to achieve this we would suggest the Government establish a Research Centre for Excellence in Tourism and National Parks Management to deal with issues surrounding the changing role of tourism and parks in society and the need to support this with organisational management change and research.

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