

## Chapter Thirty-two

# Ecotourism in Australia

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### Introduction

In Australia, where ecologically sustainable development is placed high on the political agenda, a growing number of government agencies, protected area management authorities, and conservation groups are committed to promoting nature-based tourism and ecotourism.

Tourism is a major economic activity in Australia. The Bureau of Tourism Research estimates that tourism contributed over 10% to Australia's GDP in 1995–96, generating AU\$14.1 billion in export earnings and direct employment of one million people, or 12.4% of the workforce in the same time period. Following the strategic approach set forth in Australia's National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development for Tourism, numerous measures for sustainable tourism have been initiated by the Commonwealth and state government agencies, the tourism industry, and protected area management authorities.

### The National Ecotourism Strategy

In March 1994, the Commonwealth Department of Tourism released the National Ecotourism Strategy as one of the major initiatives for developing sustainable tourism in regional Australia. Based on the principles of ecological sustainability, the National Ecotourism Strategy provides an overall framework to guide the integrated planning, development and management of ecotourism in Australia. To facilitate implementation, the Government provided AU\$10 million for funding the National Ecotourism Program which aims to foster innovative projects, enhance visitors' appreciation of natural and cultural values, and contribute to long-term conservation and management of resources. In addition, the program provides assistance in regional ecotourism planning to reduce environmental pressure on peak demand areas and to distribute the benefits of ecotourism more widely. Other auxiliary projects include infrastructure support for ecotourism (e.g. boardwalks and interpretation centres), baseline studies and monitoring projects, and extensive market research by the Bureau of Tourism Research.

### The Queensland Ecotourism Plan

At a state level, the Queensland Government is at the forefront of ecotourism promotion. In 1997, the Queensland Government launched the Queensland Ecotourism Plan (QEP) to serve as a framework for planning, developing, managing, operating and marketing ecotourism. The QEP adopts an approach of integrating "environmental and economic considerations in natural areas in ways which ally environmental protection and the commercial viability of ecotourism operations". The QEP is a comprehensive planning document with specific objectives, strategies, action plans, responsibilities, and timelines to fulfil key objectives in four areas, namely, environmental protection and management, ecotourism industry development, infrastructure development, and community development. During the past two years, Tourism Queensland, the lead agency of QEP, has built a comprehensive environmental tourism database, developed the methodology for the Environmental Tourism Rapid Assessment Model (ECORAM) for site assessment, and initiated the concept of the Environmental Tourism Infrastructure Fund (ECOTIF) for seeking seed government funding for ecotourism projects.

### Tourism in Protected Areas

Tourism in protected areas is crucial to maintaining the integrity of fragile ecosystems. For example, tourism in the Wet Tropics and the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Areas (WHAs) has increased dramatically in the last decade. Approximately 4.7 million visits to the Wet Tropics WHA were reported in 1993 and approximately 2 million visits to the Great Barrier Reef were reported on commercial tours in 1994 (Driml and Common 1996: 7). The tourism activities in both WHAs are still growing at a rapid rate. It is estimated that the tourism industry in these two WHAs is worth over AU\$1.1 billion per annum in gross expenditure terms.

The management processes of these two WHAs are classic examples to illustrate the importance of integrating tourism and conservation into a regional resource management platform. To minimise visitor impacts while achieving conservation goals, the management authorities have used various tools, including zoning, permits, management plans, entry fees, education, research and monitoring. Other uses that are not compatible with conservation, such as oil drilling on the Reef and logging of rainforest in the Wet Tropics, have been prohibited.

To promote the appropriate type of tourism, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority has initiated the Great Barrier Reef Tourism Operator Training Program, including "train the trainer" courses, self-teaching materials, reference videos and resource kits for marine park tour operators (Office of National Tourism, 1996: 21). Throughout the development of this training program, tourism operators and local communities have been actively involved. In September 1999, the Wet Tropics Management Authority launched

the Draft Wet Tropics Nature-based Tourism Strategy for public review and comment. The strategy divides the region into 12 nature-based tourism precincts, each with its own distinctive features and themes. In addition, the strategy provides policies and guiding principles for various management issues, including monitoring, research, permits, accreditation and training, marketing, and cost recovery (Wet Tropics Management Authority, 1999).

### **The Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA)**

Beside the Australian Governments, the tourism industry has also responded to the emerging ecotourism business. Formed in 1991, the Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA) serves as the peak national body for Australia's ecotourism industry. Currently, EAA has approximately 500 members, publishes an annual Australian Ecotourism Guide, and hosts an annual conference. In addition to strengthening the industry network of ecotourism operators, the EAA actively promotes "best tourism practices" through self-regulation and accreditation.

To provide tourists and the travel trade with a recognisable and authentic ecotourism product, the EAA initiated the National Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) in 1996 in cooperation with the Australia Tourism Operators Network (ATON) and the Tourism Council of Australia, with funding support from the Office of National Tourism. In 2000, the certification program changed its name to the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation program. Under NEAP, products awarded ecotourism accreditation are required to meet a comprehensive set of core criteria based on ecological sustainability and minimum environmental impact. At this stage, NEAP mostly relies on a self-assessment procedure and four forms of monitoring measures, including random on-site audits. In addition, NEAP requires periodic monitoring and management review for accredited ecotourism operators to ensure continuous improvement of standards.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The development of ecotourism in Australia is still in its infancy, with approximately 600 ecotourism operators (mostly small in size), providing an equivalent of 4500 full-time jobs and A\$250 million turnover (BRT 1995: 133–34). Although a plethora of plans and strategies are being developed in Australia to promote ecotourism, the long-term effectiveness of these newly formed programs and initiatives has yet be evaluated. To contribute towards sustainable development, these initiatives must be able to move ecotourism beyond simply a niche market within nature-based travel. Ecotourism must serve as a vehicle to transform unsustainable mass tourism practices towards genuine "greening," not just "greenwashing" of the tourism industry. In a highly competitive marketplace, the ecotourism industry is likely to face immense challenges to live up to the promise of sustainable tourism.

Ecotourism by definition promotes travel to remote natural areas with a pristine environment. The influx of tourists inevitably increases the pressure on the regional environment as well as the demand for local resources and infrastructure. Without proper planning, management, and monitoring, pristine areas may be rapidly degraded as they become popular tourist destinations (Honey 1999: 54–55, citing examples in Nepal and Kenya).

To prevent tourism operators from using ecotourism as an excuse to encroach upon protected areas, the area management authorities must evaluate the feasibility of ecotourism development projects in the context of regional resource conservation objectives as well as the ecological and social carrying capacity of the host regions. In particular, the accumulated impact of tourism development projects on the region needs to be carefully evaluated.

In addition to limitation and regulatory instruments, such as zoning and the use of permits, resource and tourism managers can employ marketplace mechanisms (e.g. pricing differentials) to provide incentives to encourage a better regional dispersal of visitors. To achieve these goals, cooperation and coordination between the tourism industry and resource planning and management authorities is absolutely crucial.

Tourism is a highly competitive industry that heavily depends on customer satisfaction from personalised services. From the demand side, consumers have many choices about how and where they use their time and money. Numerous research projects have been conducted to build up a profile of ecotourists and nature-based tourists so that different consumer segments can be identified for more effective marketing (BRT 1995: 55–132). Commercial tourism operators will market more environmentally sustainable products as soon as customers demand them and are willing to pay what it costs.

From the supply side, many commercial tourist businesses also have a wide choice of location and tourist products and play an important role in shaping the demand for holidays through active marketing and advertising. To foster sustainable tourism, ecotourism needs to grow beyond just being a niche market. To do so, the industry needs to appeal to a wider customer base at a competitive price.

Private sector business possess the practical influence needed to shift key aspects of tourism towards sustainability. However, as Middleton and Hawkins (1998: 84) point out, too few commercial tourism operators perceive an obvious incentive to do so. To encourage tourism operators to undertake responsible marketing and adopt good management practices, measures for self-regulation, such as an environmental management system and a code of practice, are particularly important in a free marketplace. Since most of the ecotourism operators are generally small in scale, governmental and

institutional support for staff training, environmental interpretation, marketing, and business management are critical to their survival.

In the ecotourism sector, identifying genuine projects that meet the criteria for sustainable development is a major issue. Some tourism operators simply use environmentally friendly terms, such as “ecotourism” and “sustainable tourism”, as a marketing strategy to repackage traditional tourism and attract environmentally-conscious travellers. To discourage such “greenwashing” and irresponsible marketing, the aforementioned NEAP in Australia has the potential to set the industry’s standards. To be effective, the value of NEAP ultimately needs to be recognised by both the tourism industry and consumers.

The effectiveness of ecotourism initiatives needs to be evaluated by its contribution towards sustainability. Thus measurements of sustainability are essential to assist operators and management agencies in developing and implementing tourism projects. To date, no Australian national standard on measuring sustainability in the tourism industry has been established. Measuring sustainability in the tourism industry is a difficult task because stakeholders seldom agree on the selection of indicators and the determination of the acceptable performance (Sebastian and McArthur 1998: 21).

To measure sustainability of tourism development, many researchers propose to adopt the performance evaluation methods and frameworks developed for planning and management. For example, Sebastian and McArthur (1998) propose a “Sustainability Barometer” model, a multi-criteria scoring system originally developed for planning, as a self-assessment tool for tourism operators, communities and government agencies to evaluate progress toward sustainability. Regardless of what method is adopted, sustainability measurements need to encompass environmental, economic and social parameters yet remain flexible and straightforward for wide application.

Contrary to traditional mass tourism, ecotourism businesses are usually small in scale and operated by local communities. This presents an opportunity not only to minimise the “leakage” of economic benefits to outside investors but establish “linkages” between tourism development and conservation objectives (McLaren 1998: 30). Community “ownership” is crucial to avoid the boom and bust cycles of typical tourism development projects and to provide local long-term employment opportunities (Honey 1999: 91). In addition, ecotourism can serve as a vehicle to promote environmental awareness and cultural sensitivity through interpretation, education, and training.

## **Conclusion**

Tourism and its supporting industries are dependent upon a given stock of natural, constructed, and socio-cultural attributes to satisfy tourist needs. As such, the conventional mass tourism industry is consumptive, rather than productive, in nature. Genuine sustainable tourism should focus on reversing the trend of the consumptive practices of traditional mass tourism through active resource conservation, planning and management. More importantly, the economic gains from sustainable tourism should benefit the host communities who are the ultimate custodians of these resources. As the tourism industry expands globally, its associated environmental, social and economic impacts can no longer be ignored.

In Australia, the tourism industry and government organisations have responded to the rising level of environmental awareness of the public and have started to promote sustainable tourism through low-impact nature-based tourism and ecotourism. Although the development of sustainable tourism is still in its infancy, genuine sustainable tourism has the potential of providing a win-win solution to achieve nature conservation and economic development under sound planning and management practices.

Ecotourism is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry. In Australia, ecotourism is considered as a niche market with great potential in setting industry standards for sustainable development. It offers the potential to generate foreign exchange earnings, create local employment opportunities, promote environmental awareness, and provide incentives for the conservation and sustainable management of public and private lands. Nonetheless, many challenges still lie ahead in promoting ecotourism. In addition to the challenges on the demand and supply side of tourism management, the overall social, economic, and environmental impacts of ecotourism development on host regions should be carefully evaluated using appropriate measurements of sustainability.

To promote sustainable tourism, a plethora of ecotourism policies and strategies already have been developed by various government agencies as well as tourism bodies. Private tourist operators are developing ecotourism products in response to the increasing demand for low-impact nature-based tourism. Only time will tell whether current tourism management, public-private partnerships, and marketing initiatives are coupled with enough safeguards to protect the resources upon which the long-term survival of the tourism industry so clearly depends.

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