THE PLACE OF ECOTOURISM,
WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO AUSTRALIA

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What is Ecotourism?

There are so many definitions of ecotourism that Figgis (1995) declared ecotourism defining has "been nominated an Olympic sport"!! Each varies subtly according to a range of political, economic and environmental agendas. For a detailed discussion of the definition of ecotourism see Lindberg & McKercher (1997). When Hector Ceballos- Lascurain, a Mexican architect and environmentalist, coined the term in 1983, it was not the only one being used to describe nature related travel. Among other common terms: nature based tourism, alternative tourism, educational tourism, sustainable tourism, cultural tourism, soft tourism, rural tourism. These terms share some common concepts (particularly that they are an alternative to mass tourism) but they are not synonymous. Such activities cannot be equated to ecotourism unless they contribute to conservation. A good example is in the Himalayas. Before 1965, fewer than 10,000 tourists per year visited Nepal. In 1996 the number had increased to over 250,000. In the nature sanctuary of Annapurna the local treeline has risen several hundred feet, as a result of local residents harvesting firewood to sell to trekkers and lodge owners. Populations of certain species of fauna have declined. Litter and water pollution has increased. So although these visitors would consider themselves nature tourists, they are not ecotourists since their visits ultimately degrade or destroy the natural resources (Ceballos- Lascurain, 1996).

The two definitions of Ecotourism that are most commonly referred to in Australia are:

> "*Nature based tourism that involves interpretation and education, and is managed to be ecologically sustainable (recognising that the 'natural environment' includes cultural components and that 'ecologically sustainable involves an appropriate return to the community and long term conservation of the resource).*"
>
> (Commonwealth Department of Tourism, 1994)

and

> "*Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation.*"
>
> (Ecotourism Association of Australia, 1991)

The origin of nature travel goes back many centuries. Herodotus in his extensive travels visited amongst other places, the Black Sea, the Agean Sea, Egypt and Italy. His work reveals he was interested in geography and the natural environment not only history. Others such as Aristotle also travelled extensively and studied nature. In later times, Marco Polo and other explorers left vivid accounts of the new lands they 'discovered'. More recently explorers such as James Cook and Charles Darwin travelled to remote lands describing the natural and cultural world of these 'new' places. But these travellers were quite remarkable. Nature travel as a popular pastime was not really developed until the late 19th Century with advances in mass travel (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Not until the mid-20th Century did world travel become possible for more than just the elite leisure class. The technological revolution in both transport and mass communications now permits ever increasing numbers of people, from different parts of the world to travel to previously inaccessible and remote locations. Nature-based travel is an increasingly important part of this global industry. During recent years the popularity of ecotourism has increased greatly, emerging from the 80's as a reaction to the excesses of development and mass tourism and raised environmental awareness (Ceballos- Lascurain, 1996).

Regardless of a general lack of genuine concern about the environmental impacts of tourism more and more governments are utilizing their natural heritage to actively promote tourism. Tourism is an important component of many national economies and has replaced many traditional primary industries as an important source of both GDP and employment. In order to exploit the potential of tourism but at the same time be sensitive to the growing awareness of the need for conservation and protection of biological and cultural resources, many governments are seeing so-called 'sustainable tourism' as the preferred model. While not all sustainable tourism fits the definition of ecotourism, all ecotourism should be sustainable. But is it? One of the main limitations is the existence of reliable and simple systems to measure the success or failure of ecotourism strategies (Ross & Wall, 1999).

Although the definitions of ecotourism vary, most agree that the main components of true ecotourism are:

- Dependant on the natural environment
- Is ecologically sustainable
- Contributes to conservation
- Features interpretation and education
- Incorporates cultural considerations
- There is net return/benefit to the local community

(Ecotourism Association of Australia, 1998)

Background

A brief history of ecologically sustainable development

The concept of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) was established at the United Nations Conference in Stockholm, 1972. In 1980, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) produced the World Conservation Strategy, subtitled *Living Resource*

Conservation for Sustainable Development, setting out the urgent need to protect the ecological systems if the earth was to be able to continue to support our future economic and social development (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991). The Ottawa Charter of the World Health Organisation, in 1986, set the challenge to conceptually link health and the environment through a vision of a new, ecological public health - seeing people and the environment as interrelated.

The World Commission on Environment and Development report *Our Common Future* (also known as the Bruntland Report), stressed the need to reconcile economic development with the resource endowment of the natural world (WCED,1987). The Rio Earth Summit in Brazil, 1992 and the consequent declaration of 'Agenda 21' placed ESD firmly on the agenda of national, state and local governments throughout the world. The challenge posed by the Bruntland Report was to strive for sustainable development, though this admirable objective has been clouded somewhat by the ambiguity of the term 'sustainable'. It took some time to recognise that sustainability is socially and politically constructed, that political and economic agendas differ considerably from place to place and override the ecological agenda (McCool,1996) .

If tourism development, which in the 70's and 80's was characterised by massive growth fuelled only by economic motives, is to be environmentally responsible it must embrace a more ecological and balanced approach. It begins with understanding biological processes, ecological principles and the sensitivities of biological systems, of which humans are a part. The Bruntland report is the strategy for sustainable development, it aims to promote harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature. It is not a green conspiracy, nor a marketing gimmick. It is not saying we should have no growth or no development. But it is saying that this must be managed in a way that does not destroy resources for future generations.

The future well-being of humanity on earth depends on concurrently satisfying both the health and well-being needs of the biosphere's ecosystem, and the health and well-being needs of human beings. The biosphere is something of global concern, due to the universal ecological impact of humans. This is due to the combined effects of an extraordinarily high material standard of living and a massive increase in world population. Ninety per cent of the negative ecological load caused by humans is due to industrial activities and the use of machines and vehicles driven by fossil fuels, as part of our urban lifestyles (Boyden & Shirlow, 1989). Tourism, unfortunately, usually encourages high-energy usage in developing as well as developed countries and areas, in a manner that is not sustainable, and demands high use of resources like water and prime agricultural land. It is also creating awareness, expectations and demands for a western standard of living, and with it high resource consumption in the developing world, with their massive populations. This alone is a good reason for tourism to strive to demonstrate truly sustainable development, rather than the absolute excesses of luxury and hedonistic lifestyle.

Many concepts are well developed in the literature dealing with sustainable tourism. These include:
- the notion of carrying capacity;
- limits of acceptable change and acceptable use;
- maintenance of 'sense of place';
- host/guest relationships;
- the debate about authenticity and commodification of culture and place;
- debate about the ethics of tourism, particularly in developing countries and areas where

populations are more vulnerable and impressionable to the demonstration effects of visitors from wealthier nations;   and

- the idea of the destination life cycle.

In all of these, the debate centres around different principles of sustainable development, the tension between economic rationalism and other value systems; the dialectic between spatial, temporal and ethical approaches to tourism planning and development. This includes - supply versus demand; global versus local; small scale versus large scale; and about local versus imported –goods, services, labour etcetera. The challenge is taking these concepts and making the practice of tourism sustainable, this includes ecotourism. The label does not reduce the impacts of taking increasing numbers of people into the most fragile and ecologically important areas. Nor does the label change the reality that ecotourism operators require transport systems, or that the tourists require accommodation, meals and ablution facilities. All of these create environmental impacts. Increasingly under the banner of advanced ecotourism accreditation businesses are looking to place these impacts directly in previously protected areas, such as World Heritage Areas. This raises many questions about the optimum relationship between tourism and conservation. To understand this requires consideration of the foundation of ecologically sustainable development.

The principles of ecologically sustainable development

One of the recommendations of the Bruntland report was to encourage industries to be more efficient in the use of resources, to minimise waste and pollution, to minimise irreversible adverse effects on human health and the environment, and to base production as far as possible, on the use of renewable resources.The main elements of ESD relevant to tourism, espoused in the Bruntland report are:

- Inter-generational equity - **responsibility for the future**;
- Intra- generational equity - **current social fairness**;
- **Conservation of biological diversity and ecological processes** - retention of ecosystems;
- **Precautionary principle** - anticipation of future problems, if any doubt avoid the risks and take them into consideration;
- **Internalisation of environmental cost** - inclusion of all short and long term environmental costs;
- Improvement in **non-material** as well as material wellbeing;
- **The global principle** - no industry should contribute towards unsustainable activities in another country.   (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991)

Sustainable Tourism

Leading from ESD is the ideal of sustainable tourism, however many of the principles articulated above are overridden by economic values. Consequently, most of the current goals of tourism planning authorities are numeric and are measured in visitor numbers and yield, in terms of investment and spending. The underlying assumption that tourism will

generate economic benefit is reasonable. But the extension therefore, that more visitors will result in greater gain is inherently flawed, since it does not consider the large amount of infrastructure which is required, such as roads, public transport, utilities, services and facilities. This creates considerable expense for local rate payers, overburdens existing systems designed for steady population growth rather than seasonal massive influxes, together with inconvenience, loss of amenity, congestion and other generally negative impacts including increases in crime and pollution. The investors are often not local, nor are the employees, and goods and services are often imported from another region or another country. This means the promised economic benefit often 'leaks out'. These pressures all contribute to a sense of loss of control and loss of 'place' by residents of popular destinations, who do not necessarily see tangible benefits. So it is reasonable to question if tourism can be sustainable at the local level. What is the social carrying capacity of a community to cope with the constant pressure of visitors? The negative social effects are more marked in developing countries and regions with more traditional social and cultural values; and the ecological impact are more dramatic in fragile areas with high value endangered or rare ecosystems and species. The paradox is that it is the 'exotic' cultures and the endangered species that are the most highly prized tourism attractions.

There is a trap of what is called 'profitless volume'. It can affect an individual business, eg. putting on a new bus and a new driver to cater for marginal increase. It can affect whole areas, by requiring massive new capital investment for basic infrastructure beyond the return; or infrastructure increases that create changes in patterns of normal life. Several problems have been identified in attempts to successfully design 'sustainable' tourism for sensitive places. Despite the many benefits cited there is little research to demonstrate that 'nature based or cultural tourism' is socially, culturally or environmentally benign (Pearce, 1992). Indeed numerous studies suggest that even the most lightly trodden path of tourism can destroy fragile soils and flora; the fauna can be affected just by watching (McElroy & de Alburquerque, 1996). Even the 'take only photos leave only footprints' ethic of ecotourism can be highly disruptive to the lives of many people who do not welcome the 'invasion' of visitors, particularly when it is the most sacred of ceremonies and private lives that attract the most photographers, or walking and climbing over sacred sites. So in assessing the profitability of tourism all of the costs must be factored in. At the moment most of the ecological, social and cultural costs are externalized.

The current debate that emerged over the temporary closure of access to climb Uluru (Ayres Rock) in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, to visitors, highlights an ethical dilemma of the way in which the economics of tourism are in conflict with the spiritual values of local people. The local Indigenous people, the Anangu have never liked visitors climbing 'The Rock' which for them is an important sacred site. However pressure from tourism operators, including within their own community, believed this access would provide greater economic benefit. With the recent death of a senior Elder, the Anangu community closed access to the summit as a mark of respect. This action outraged members of the Northern Territory Government and some tour operators who believed that the many visitors with bookings to Uluru would be very disappointed and had a right to expect this access. Public sympathy in popular media was divided, but many feel that as a sacred site it should be permanently closed and should be viewed with the respect and integrity of a site of significant cultural and natural heritage value, and as the custodians would prefer.

Uluru was the second site in the world to be on the World Heritage list for its cultural significance. Reducing "the Uluru experience to a mere climb up a rock is an insult to Indigenous people - and to the tourists who come here." Galarrwuy Yunupingu, Chairman of the Northern Land council. Is tourism sustainable when it devalues such a site to just its economic worth?

There are other problems associated with tourism that mitigate against the concepts of sustainability, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas such as small islands. On islands there exists a basic incompatibility between large-scale consumption and waste intensive, high throughput, highly dynamic international economy transposed on a fragile, small-scale static and relatively closed environmental system (McElroy & de Alburquerque, 1996). Another issue of sustainability involves tourisms' pervasive nature and the uncertain development over space and time (Pigram,1992). Once tourism development begins it is usually followed by more development – each stage justifying &/or necessitating the next.

Also, as tourism is highly competitive, businesses are often very small and working at the margin of profitability. It is very seasonal, so economic returns are the constant priority, not the maintenance of biodiversity. And so the natural environment becomes increasingly vulnerable to short term economic decision-making. The ideas of limits of acceptable change or acceptable use and carrying capacity are attractive. Determining those limits is much more difficult scientifically, socially and politically. The process is also expensive, so usually the limits do not exist. However, nature does have limits, therefore tourism must be managed to planning limits. Tourism planning and development needs to be integrated into broader bioregional planning, rather than just local government or tourism region planning. It needs to utilise tools such as integrated resource management. Just as tourists do not recognise local and state boundaries, nor do the impacts. It requires ongoing social and environmental impact assessment, as the impacts are cumulative and extend well beyond just the immediate site (Bushell, 1999a).

Tourism needs to be managed to maximise both visitor satisfaction and local distribution of benefits. The indicators of successful tourism need to expand well beyond the current economic indicators so that the goals expand and the planning process considers them (Ross & Wall,1999). What are the other benefits to plan for? What benefits can be built in for biodiversity conservation? For Indigenous people? For local residents?

The recent tragic accident on Australia's Fraser Island, again highlights the ethical dilemmas of tourism and how nature conservation is routinely considered a lower order priority to the needs of the visitors, and the economic gain. A young child was killed by a dingo while on a camping holiday with his family. The reaction of government and tourism authorities was to order an immediate cull of the dingo population. The fact that the dingoes on Fraser Island are amongst the purest breed of dingo, and that the dingoes have been habituated to people by visitors who choose to ignore all requests by the National Parks Service not to feed the wildlife, and that some operators actively encourage the animals by feeding to provide good photo opportunities for their clients, as part of the wildlife/ecotourism/adventure experience. At the time of the 'attack' it was breeding season for the dingoes. Since this time visitors have continued to feed the

animals. Public debate was again strongly divided and while everyone sympathized with the family and their shocking loss, many were equally appalled that the Queensland Tourism authorities, who have a strong reputation for ecotourism, were not willing to speak in support of more rational steps to protect visitor safety. Such ecological impacts of tourism demonstrate the very tenuous application of the label of either 'ecotourism' or 'sustainable tourism'. In this case both biodiversity conservation needs and the wishes of the local Indigenous Butchulla people were ignored.

Tourism is considered one of the largest and fastest growing global industries. It is in fact not really an industry at all, but a series of industries that collectively facilitate and service the unprecedented global, national and local movement of people for recreation, entertainment, sport, education, cultural, religious, medical, family and business purposes. Together with economic importance it also has massive impacts - both positive and negative – and implications for the social and environmental well being of the planet. For this activity to be part of sustainable development imperatives, there needs to be balance between the demands of economic viability, environmental stability and social and cultural compatibility at all levels from the global to local in all facets of its operation (Bushell, 1999b). It needs to viewed as a tool for 'environmental protection' and 'community development' not just as a business. It must relate to both the people and the place, and their future.

Indigenous people and tourism

Together with issues of host community, are issues of "traditional use" of biological resources, land rights, and ownership. The rights of Indigenous people is now recognised as extremely important, Indigenous knowledge is tied to concepts of sustainable land use. Like many Indigenous peoples, the Butchulla, Aboriginal people of Fraser Island, North Eastern Australia, have a local law "what is good for the land comes first". The Kogi people of Sierra, Nevada live by what they call the 'Law of the Mother' that regulates human behaviour in harmony with natures' cycles (Kempf, 1993). Throughout the world there are many examples of Indigenous knowledge leading the way in ecological thinking. But it is also true that where Indigenous people have been dislocated from their culture and lands, urbanised and industrialised, they are not innately compelled to environmentally sustainable ways of doing or thinking.

The debates over appropriate use of protected areas and models of management have also been linked to efforts to restore and address the land rights of Indigenous peoples. The 1992, IUCN Caracas declaration called upon governments and appropriate organizations, including the tourism industry, to :

> *Support the development of national protected area policies which are sensitive to customs and traditions (and) safeguard the interests of Indigenous people.*

In the struggles of a number of Indigenous peoples to save their forests, such as in the Amazon, and in Borneo they have looked to nature-based and cultural tourism as a means of regaining ownership, control and financial independence. And the increasingly discerning ecotourism markets are very interested in supporting Indigenous peoples. Careful consideration is required in planning and developing tourism activities that involve traditional communities, and their role

and rights in protected areas. It is important to ensure prior consent, participation in all the processes, respect of traditions, and benefit sharing. Equally important is the taking into account the different interest groups within these communities, which are themselves far from homogenous or agreement on many issues of conservation and/or tourism. These once hegemonic societies now face new struggles as the impact not only of tourism, but modernity in general, means traditional values are often highly contested.

Protected Areas and tourism

The consideration of the Indigenous people's rights to 'protected areas' has also served to remind us that the concept of 'nature' is socially constructed. For example, many of the areas the western world considers wilderness, have for centuries been home to Indigenous people. For thousands of years, the Anangu, an aboriginal desert people of central Australia, have flourished in what to non-aboriginal people seems a place of total desolation. To the Anangu, this arid land is home, the source of their spirit and a place of enduring beauty (Cordell, 1993). The concept of wilderness as an 'untouched or untamed land is mostly an urban perception, the view of people who are far removed from the natural environment they depend upon' (Gomez-Pompa & Kaus, 1992:273). A vast 'undisturbed' area, with unique wildlife species and spectacular scenery, is the typical popular image associated with protected areas, but these represent different values to different people. The same area may be regarded by conservationists as an ideal habitat for rare species; as having exceptional scientific merit for a biologist or botanist; high economic value to a forester, a great place to go shooting for a hunter and of significant spiritual meaning to another person. Protected areas are a social space, socially conceived and preserved (Ghimire & Pimbert, 1997:5). This 'construction of nature' varies in time across cultural, political and social beliefs and economic status. This influences the values placed on nature and what is regarded as priority for protection and what is acceptable use (Figgis, 1999; Staiff, Kennedy & Bushell, 1999). Nature-based tourism is but one of the contested forms of use for such places. Ecotourism is an attempt to respect the ecological, spiritual and cultural values held in relation to such places, whilst still enabling economic development and enjoyment by a wide range of people.

One of the social realities is the priority given to economic values of nature. Nature-based tourism is increasingly important because of the potential to contribute to local and national economies. The economic benefits of park-based tourism can far exceed government expenditure to manage such sites (Driml & Common, 1995; Eagles, 1999; Taskforce on Economic Benefits, 1998). Australia receives over $A2 billion in visitor associated expenditure from eight national parks - at a direct cost to governments of some $A60 million. In Costa Rica, about $US 12 million is spent annually to maintain national parks. In 1991 more than $US 330 million was generated largely through overseas visitors (Taskforce on Economic Benefit, 1998).

> "It is ironic that while humanity has relentlessly decimated wildlife and natural lands, it has simultaneously grown to value them more highly. Nature tourism is a growing sector of the huge global industry. In Australia most of the $A26.7 billion tourism industry is based on the attractions of the Australian environment, the key elements of which are protected areas". (Figgis, 1999:46).

Nature-based tourism, and in particular ecotourism, also importantly creates the opportunity to provide incentive for nature conservation and the maintenance of protected areas. There is a need for everyone to play a role in stewardship of our environment. Nature-based tourism and outdoor recreation can play a role in fostering this notion of stewardship, by firstly making people more appreciative of nature, and also becoming more attuned to the increasing loss of open space, and the impacts of our current lifestyles on the natural environment. This awareness contributes to people's willingness to support conservation measures and possibly to become more actively involved. These areas have great value not only for biodiversity conservation. The values of protected areas to society can be summarised as: contribution to biodiversity conservation, which in turn benefits nature conservation, health, agriculture, industry and foreign affairs; contribution to watershed protection assisting in natural resources and water supply management; assistance with storm protection and reduction in natural disaster damage; the provision of a major asset of the tourism industry, and consequently economic regional and local development; contribution to local amenity which supports local government in the provision of healthy environments, open spaces and recreational opportunity, all contributing to quality of life and public health; provision of forest products which support forestry, local communities and economic development; soil conservation which assists agriculture and natural resource management; the provision of large areas for carbon sequestration, contributing to energy policy and foreign affairs; provision of research and education facilities and field stations for the advancement of science, knowledge and education at all levels; and the maintenance of cultural values contributing to community health, wellbeing and sense of place (adapted from Phillips,1998 in Sheppard,1999).

The environmental impacts of tourism

As already stated, tourism is largely a natural resource based industry. As such it has impacts on air, land and water. Also it experiences acute seasonal peaks in demand. This creates pressure on infrastructure such as water supply, sewerage systems, roads and community services, which have usually been designed to cater for a much smaller population base. Seasonal demand can also concentrate pressure on natural resources causing adverse ecological impacts.

General environmental impacts of tourism include those resulting from the development of tourism infrastructure and facilities, and those arising from tourists themselves. The impacts will vary according to the area, its features and the type of tourism of activity and intensity.

Coastal zone developments have resulted in beach and dune erosion, decreased diversity in native vegetation and loss of some species. Some ecosystems, such as wetlands, have been lost with significant ramifications for biodiversity and for other economic sectors such as fishing and agriculture. Marine environments are affected by human visitation and activities on nearby lands. Noting that tourism is usually part of the broader process of urbanisation, and so too are the impacts, which highlights a concern of many conservationists, that ecotourism just spreads the impact beyond urbanised areas.

Protected areas need to considered very carefully. The tourism industry is already reliant on protected areas and the experiences they offer the visitor. The growing trend in nature-based tourism will intensify pressures.

Semi-arid and arid lands have become a draw card for tourism. The increasing accessibility of outback areas has the potential to generate quite significant impacts. Ecosystems in semi-arid and arid regions may not be as resilient as ecosystems with higher rainfall and greater reserves of water.

Alpine areas attract many recreational activities such as skiing in winter and bush walking and horse riding in summer. Again, these are more fragile ecosystems and increased use imposes environmental damage.   (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991)

The Principles of Sustainable Tourism

In 1995 the World Tourism Organisation, the World Travel and Tourism Council and the Earth Council adopted a joint declaration "Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry: Towards Environmentally Sustainable Development" based on the 'Brundtland Report'. It is a draft action programme for the tourism industry and includes the following principles:

- tourism should help people live a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature;
- tourism should contribute to the conservation, protection and rehabilitation of ecosystems;
- protection of the environment should be an integral component of tourism development;
- tourism should be planned at the local level and allow for the participation of the citizens;
- tourism should recognise and support the identity, culture and interests of indigenous peoples;
- international agreements to protect the environment should be respected by the tourism industry

                                                                                    (WTO, 1995)

Many fora of national and international conservation agencies, tourism organisations, researchers and governments have developed various codes, guidelines and declarations on different aspects of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism. Despite this, the practices of this global industry have changed little. Systems of management and control are not equipped to predict, measure or monitor often complex, subtle and cumulative impacts on biodiversity, in either the short or long term. Environmental costs typically are externalised. So what is needed to achieve the goals of sustainable tourism? And, what is the role of ecotourism? (Bushell, 1999b).

Why the focus on Ecotourism?

For a number reasons ecotourism has been experiencing increasing interest worldwide from government, non-government organisations and the tourism industry itself. These include that:
- there is massive growth in the ecotourism niche market;
- it is seen to be leading the 'greening' of the tourism industry;
- it is a market driven response to the demands of an environmentally aware community;
- there are real economic benefits;
- within Australia many areas, especially regional centres, have a competitive advantage in this market.

In an Industry Outlook Survey by Tourism NSW in 2000, the natural environment was rated by tourism businesses as the single most important external contributing factor to tourism sales. Natural environments frequented for tourism purposes include reefs, beaches and headlands; estuaries; wetlands and rivers; rainforests; mountains; caves; snowfields; open woodlands; grasslands and deserts. These environments collectively support a great diversity of wildlife and flora, some of which are threatened or endangered, which adds significantly to their tourism potential and visitor interest. Within nature tourism, ecotourism represents a small proportion of overall product. From the BTR National Visitor Survey and International Visitor Survey the most popular and common ecotourism products within NSW are ecolodges, guided four-wheel drive tours, guided walks, guided cave viewing and dolphin watching. From Tourism Trends 1999 (Tourism NSW) approximately 14.2 million domestic and international visitors stated they had visited a natural area in NSW. These included in decreasing order of visitation NSW beaches, national parks, state forests and natural areas on private land. This figure is only a fraction of the number of visits actually recorded by site managers, where some system of visitor monitoring occurs. The actual number of visits across all natural areas in New South Wales could be conservatively estimated to be well over 80 million per year, given most of these resources are not monitored in away that enables accurate numbers of visitor to be determined. From the figures that are available from the National and International Visitor Surveys show increasing numbers (TNSW, 2001).

The benefits of Ecotourism

There are a number of benefits to be gained from ecotourism The first is the role it can play in economic development and diversification, particularly in regional areas. There are real economic benefits as the ecotourism market is higher yielding attracting tourists generally within a higher socio-economic group than mass tourism. These visitors have a tendency for greater expenditure and length of stay compared to tourists generally. The businesses themselves are generally small and locally owned, and ecotourism businesses are more likely to conform to the ethic of buying and utilizing local product, services, employees and suppliers. Hence the economic benefit will stay in the local area whereas in most mass tourism businesses where much of the product and services is imported, the economic benefit leaks out of the local area. Part of this economic benefit is the generation of income for conservation and the management of national parks and other public land. As well as employing local people ecotourism creates a value for local knowledge, and with this comes increased awareness and pride in the local community. Tourism can act as a lever for protecting this local knowledge, local culture and local environment.

The Problems of Ecotourism

Despite the well documented benefits and the good practice of some in the tourism industry, there are many examples of accredited and award winning enterprises that utilize ecotourism as a marketing tool, but who clearly do not consider ecological or cultural issues to be as important as economic considerations. In some cases original sound plans and concepts are lost by new management taking over; in some cases approval is been for an operation, often in a location that is not suitable for large scale or high impact activities and operations but overtime the operation grows and expands using local economic benefit as the logic for the approval of expansion.

Additionally the reality is that many of those who consider themselves ecotourists do not put the needs of natural world ahead of their own comfort, especially when on holidays. So the efforts of the early pioneers of ecotourism to live very lightly with few necessities have given way to saunas, spas, air-conditioning, central heating, 4 wheel drive and air-conditioned buses. Despite using new technology that reduces the waste and reduces the impacts on one hand, the net effect of the impacts can be many fold by virtue of the large volume of usage and the increasing numbers of guests. In many instances ecotourism and mass tourism are becoming more similar.

The view of the environmental movement in Australia seems to be that ecotourism has caused the general tourism industry to lift its game in relation to the environment, but that the industry has yet to accept that in order to achieve the ideals of ecotourism or indeed sustainable tourism, nature conservation has to be placed first, and the industry must accept the constraints which flow from this approach. Most environmentalists remain very concerned that once commercial development gets a foothold in national parks the demands of the developer and tourism will only increase and the needs of conservation will be increasingly compromised (Figgis, 2000).

Profile of an Ecotourist

To understand ecotourism and its impacts requires a knowledge of the ecotourism market. Research conducted by the Bureau of Tourism Research in Australia (EAA 1998) indicates how 'ecotourists' choose their eco-experience, they:
>Value personalised service coupled with high quality natural resources;
>Often select their tours once they are in the area and level of interpretation provided is one of the major considerations;
>Word of mouth and local information are important sources of influence.

The BTR research suggests that there are 3 broad ecotourism market segments. These are:
1. Impulse:
   Characterised by nature based day trips away from the main tourist destinations and mainly booked locally by domestic and international tourists
2. Active:
   Characterised by younger and middle aged professionals who generally book in advance. There is a skew to domestic tourists although there could well be the potential for growth through international marketing, infrastructure and product development; and
3. Personalised:
   Essentially older professionals (or retired) who expect to be well looked after by the operator. This segment is skewed to international tourists who book overnight ecotours before arriving in Australia

In general they are looking for:
>Interaction with other people who are preferably like minded and compatible;
>Some level of interaction with the environment;
>Some degree of information and learning;
>Fun and enjoyment.
>>(EAA, 1998)

The Australian National and International Visitor Surveys also reveals profiles of these visitors. The majority of the nature tourism market for New South Wales (84%) comes from within Australia (domestic market). NSW received 26.5 million overnight domestic visitors in 1999, of which 7.9 million (30%) participated in at least one nature tourism activity. In regions with prominent natural attractions such as the South Coast and the Blue Mountains these participation rates are even higher (65% & 52% respectively). In the same year, there were 2.2 million international visitors and some 1.5 million (65%) participated in at least one nature tourism activity or visited at least one natural area. So in total numbers the international visitor is a smaller component of the nature based market, but are a higher proportion of the number of international visitors than the domestic nature based market. This research also identified a 25% growth from previous years in the international nature-based, adventure and ecotourism markets. These figures will be expected to increase especially for the Blue Mountains Region now that the area has received World Heritage Area listing. Within the international market the greatest numbers in the nature based market segment are from Germany, United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. In terms of proportions of the total numbers from these source markets Taiwan, Japan and Korea are also important with 60 – 70% of all these Asian visitors going for some nature based experience. This is due largely to day bus trips to the Blue Mountains, whereas the other groups are more likely to stay and be involved in an ecotourism product. As part of the tourism research undertaken by various government departments data show that markets can be analysed as *definite nature tourists* (do get involved) *probable nature tourists* (might get involved) and *non-nature tourists* (unlikely to get involved). This research suggests that for the domestic market 91% of *definite nature tourists* will come from urban areas and will be between 25 and 54 years of age; the *definite nature tourists* are more likely to be female, have an administrative or managerial occupation and earn between $40,000 and $60,0000. The *probable nature tourists* are most likely to be retired. For the international market the *definite nature tourists* are between 25 and 34 years of age, slightly more likely to be female, travel as a couple, and earn under $40,000. The backpacker *definite nature tourists* come from Northern European countries, are more likely to be male, more likely to be single, highly likely to be aged between 20 and 34 years and either earn under $30,000 or over $100,000 (TNSW, 2001). These trends and figures show the market as one with strong economic potential and one where the visitor is interested in learning about their surroundings, however there is poor data about their expectations, intentions, length of stay or yield. Without this information it is difficult to speculate about how environmentally aware or conscious the average nature tourist or ecotourist really is.

Whilst there are concerns about whether it is possible to balance the economic demands of running a tourism business with the environmental management necessities to prevent ecological impacts the following is a case study of an ecotourism operation that has managed to remain true to the ideals of ecotourism and to prosper economically.

Binna Burra Lodge , an ecotourism lodge on the edge of the Lamington National Park, S.E. Queensland

(http://www.binnaburralodge.com.au)

The History of Binna Burra

Binna Burra Mountain Lodge is a fully advanced accredited eco-tourism retreat that combines the peace and tranquillity of a mountain getaway with a unique opportunity to explore and learn more about the rainforest environment of the Lamington National Park.

One of Australia's longest-established nature-based resorts, Binna Burra Mountain Lodge was founded in 1933 by Arthur Groom and Romeo Lahey. These two pioneering conservationists shared a vision to create a place where people could stay and experience the beauty of the Lamington National Park rainforest. Through interpretive walks and educational programs, they believed more people would become committed to preserving this natural wilderness for future generations.

In the early 1930s, they purchased the last freehold title on the boundary of Lamington National Park and formed a public company to fund the establishment of what was to become BinnaBurra Mountain Lodge. The first BinnaBurra camp was held over the Christmas holidays in 1933. Romeo, Arthur and 70 hardy adventurers set up a collection of tents on the "saddle". For five shillings a day, they were provided with accommodation, meals and guided walks through the rainforest.

"Romeo Lahey was a most interesting man to talk with. He knew the whole district like the palm of his hand, loved the country and knew every tree. At night we had stories and sing songs around the campfire." - Margery Pryor, Participant in first Christmas camp. Despite cyclonic storms which ripped through the mountains from Boxing Day until New Year, the camp was declared a success and the decision was made to build permanent cabins on the property. An old Canungra boarding house was dismantled and brought up to Binna Burra by packhorse, to serve as the dining and recreation room.

For the cabins, tallow-wood slabs and stringy-bark shingles were hewn from the local timber. By Easter 1934, the first hut was nearly finished and, by 1939, Binna Burra Mountain Lodge could accommodate 54 guests. The road was extended in 1947 to eliminate that last 400m trek and a network of walking tracks provided easier access to the rainforest wilderness.
Binna Burra quickly became a popular destination with keen bushwalkers of all ages. It also attracted a number of scientists studying the flora and fauna of this living laboratory. Guided, interpretive bushwalks were a feature of the Binna Burra experience even from the earliest days.

Lamington National Park is a World Heritage-listed wilderness situated in the Border Ranges of southeast Queensland, a short distance from the Gold Coast. This vast forested region contains Australia's largest preserve of pristine sub-tropical rainforest.
The dramatic landscape of radiating ridges and cliff-lined valleys results from 20 million years of erosion to a huge volcanic mountain, the remnant core of which is known as Mount Warning. During climatic fluctuations and sea-level changes over the millennia, the mountain has remained a refuge for the various populations of Australia's Gondwana derived flora and fauna.

Because the central core of sub-tropical rainforest is bordered by a variety of other typical Australian vegetation types, the diversity of plants and animals is remarkable. The National Park boasts over 900 species of vascular plants and over 120 bird species. A system of well formed and gently graded trails allows the visitor easy access to the majority of the parks features - ranging from palm filled valleys with waterfalls and crystal clear rivers to mist covered tops (1100 metres) clothed in cool-temperate rainforests dominated by Antarctic Beech trees. In between you can visit the spectacular eroded cliffs, enjoy wonderful vistas from prominent points or stroll through the wildflowers in shrubby heartlands.

The Principles of Ecotourism In Practice

Without going into an exhaustive listing of the practices at Binna Burra the following highlights how the operation complies with the main guiding principles of ecotourism.

1. **focuses on personally experiencing natural areas in ways that lead to greater understanding and appreciation**

   - *guided early morning, day and nocturnal walks through surrounding natural areas with informative and entertaining commentary that focuses on the natural values of the area by expert interpretative staff*

   - *carefully prepared maps and self-guiding brochures are available from the Lodge special interest activity weeks, eg frog and bird weeks, photography week, ecology weekends*

   - *every day guests can take part in a full adventure activities repeilling down the face of the volcanic escarpment, soar above the treetops on the longest flying fox in the southern hemisphere or challenge themselves on the high and zipline ropes course.*

2. **integrates opportunities to understand natural areas into each experience**

   - *availability of reference material, interpretive signage along walking trails*

   - *guests are encouraged to learn more about the Lamington National Park wilderness, its fauna and flora in a well-stocked Library*

   - *information evenings with Lodge staff and guest expert presenters*

- *songs and sounds of the rainforest are played in the dining room and available for purchase*

- *childrens' play equipment designed to create environmental awareness in the "Discovery Forest".*

3. represents best practice for ecologically sustainable tourism

- *have Advanced Ecotourism Accreditiation;*

- *have won numerous environmental tourism awards;*

- *minimal disruption to wildlife, including not feeding birds and animals, and protecting native vegetation and requesting the washing of hiking boots before entering the National Park to avoid the introduction of exotic species;*

- *A code of conduct of 'Best Environmental Practices' provides guests with advice in relation to recycling; minimising usage of water and electricity; the use of soaps and detergents, supplying guests with a fully biodegradable product;*

- *the Lodge provides accommodation for a maximum of 115 guests in rustic timber and log cabins built from hand-cut tallow wood slabs in keeping with the heritage of the site. Some of the cabins date back to when the Lodge was first established in the early 1930s and while they have all been fully updated with modern amenities and energy and water saving devices, there are no phones, clocks, radios or television to encourage relaxation;*

- *supplies for the Lodge are sourced locally as far as possible;*

- *the heritage of the Lodge and National Park is prominently and tastefully displayed and stories presented pictorially in the lounge;*

- *provide high quality camping for budget travellers, again with minimal impact codes of conduct and facilities.*

4. positively contributes to the ongoing conservation of natural areas

- *assistance with fauna and flora surveys;*

- *involved actively in the reafforestation with endemic rainforest species raised in onsite nursery;*

- *assist National Parks with many projects such as removal of lantana and other weeds, track maintenance, burn offs, ; provide free treated water to the Park Visitor Information Centre; assist with bush fire fighting;*

- *provide financial assistance to the local natural history society and meeting venue on site;*

- *provide low cost overnight environmental education centre for use by school groups*

5. **provides constructive ongoing contributions to local communities**

- *have established a very strong and co-operative partnership with the National Park Service;*

- *purchase of local goods, including country cuisine served using local pottery;*

- *contributions to local environment groups;*

  employ locals;

- *sell locally-produced arts, crafts, souvenirs from the Lodge Gift Shop;*

- *work closely with the local school and make donations and staff available to assist with school activities*

6. **is sensitive to, interprets and involves different cultures, particularly indigenous culture**

- *traditional custodians have not been located and the Indigenous history is not known though it has been researched;*

- *literature relating to Indigenous culture are included in the Library materials*

- *the souvenirs are all very sensitive to and respectful of Indigenous culture and does not include the often kitch and bad taste stereotypical 'Aboriginal' motifs often associated with tourism outlets*

7. **consistently meets client expectations**

- *informal feedback on client satisfaction is sought through surveys and indicates that the majority of clients are highly satisfied with their experience. A very high rate of repeat visitation , and many coming back repeatedly for many years;*

- *Formation of a Friends of Binna Burra (FOB) who work for free on their holidays on special projects, like removal of lantana, tending seedlings, planting new stock, work on tracks;*

- *guests join in the friendly ambience of communal seating in the Clifftop Dining Room to facilitate meeting other guests and sharing experience and tales of the days activities over fresh home-style food .*

8. **marketing is accurate and leads to realistic expectations**

- *use a high quality internet site*
- *majority of advertising by word of mouth and repeat visitation*

This case study serves to demonstrate how a commitment to the conservation of nature and concern for the local community serve to make a tourism operation which is not only economically viable but also meets the needs of the visitors, who return regularly and share the aspirations of the original owners and current management. However, caution is needed, not all ecotourism is so ethical. Sonny Pepper, Chairman of the Yalata Aboriginal Community of South Australia said:

> "You can talk about ecotourism all you like. You can dream up lots of wonderful ideas for tours. I can see the dollar signs in some people's eyes. One thing you must realize is that you cannot have ecotourism without looking after the places properly. If you don't look after the places properly ecotourism isn't going to last".
> (Pepper, 1993 cited in Figgis, 1995)

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