

# Research Note

## Draft Principles for Tourism in Protected Areas

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Ecotourism businesses need accessible natural environments, and many of them are in national parks or other protected areas. But the parks were set up for conservation and public recreation, not tourism. So how should they deal with commercial tour operators? Market to them, keep them out, ignore them, licence them, change them, compete with them, restrict them, form partnerships with them? Or perhaps all of the above, in different times and places and circumstances?

In practice the politics are complex, and different in every country, but the same issues arise repeatedly. So, do we need to start from scratch every time, or are there some basic principles which might apply generally? As an analogy, in the real estate rental business we don't negotiate every lease from scratch – there are standard leases, and negotiations focus on period, rent and special conditions. Could we use a similar approach for tourism in parks?

At the Australian Academy of Science Fenner Conference on Nature Tourism and the Environment in September 2001, I tried to formulate such principles as a starting point, so that we could proceed directly to technical discussion on ways and means. With tour operators, tourism agencies, park managers and academics all present, I tried to stick to the simplest, most unequivocal statements. 'Commercial tour operators are legally different from members of the general public', for example. That's just a fact, right? But even these provoked controversy.

So in the three months after the conference we compiled comments from all concerned, and reworked the first draft into the version below, where principles are separated from preamble. In Australia at present, this version is being debated within tourism associations and protected area management agencies, under the aegis of the Ecotourism Association of Australia's Tourism and Protected Areas Forum. But the draft Principles apply worldwide, and where better to debate them than the *Journal of Ecotourism*? So we welcome your comments, and shall be glad to consider them for publication either in their entirety, in precis, or as part of a modified set of Principles.

### Preamble

- No economy without environment.
- Sustainability is a social process.
- Parks are critical for conservation.
- Parks are underfunded.
- Tourism is a large industry.
- Tourism in parks is growing.

- Parks are valuable for tourism.
- Tourism is fundamentally different from recreation.
- Tourism can provide recreational experiences.
- Tour operators can provide valuable visitor interpretation.
- Parks-use conflicts are increasingly commonplace.
- Commercial tourism in public parks is a politically charged issue.
- Parks and tourism have different goals.
- Commercial agreements aren't automatically win-win.
- These principles are for IUCN Category II protected areas.

## Principles

- Parks are for conservation first.
- Parks are for recreation second.
- Only low-impact recreation should be in parks.
- Tourism has no special right to parks.
- Planning for parks and tourism needs a regional ecosystem approach.
- Partnerships need consent not coercion.
- Any user fees should reflect management costs including conservation impacts.
- Tourism facilities in parks should provide a net benefit for conservation.
- Commercial tour operators should meet all the costs they impose on parks.
- Commercial tour operators should pay a resource rent.
- Marketing should match park plans.
- Parks agencies need a range of staff skills.

## Supporting Information – Preamble

*No economy without environment.* Technological inventiveness gives the human species enormous adaptability to changing environmental conditions at a local scale. At a global scale, however, the human species is entirely dependent on the natural environment for air, water, food, warmth, shelter and ultimately survival. Conservation, in the sense of maintaining a functioning planetary ecosystem, is hence the single most critical priority facing human societies. Ultimately, the entire human economy and the whole of human society is underpinned by the natural environment.

*Sustainability is a social process.* The practicalities of conserving natural environments, however, depend upon human social structures and individual behaviour, i.e. on the human environment including economic and other social factors. Sustainable development is therefore conceptualised as a triple bottom line: environmental, economic, social.

*Parks are critical for conservation.* National Parks and other protected areas, though not sufficient on their own, are the single most critical core components in global conservation of biodiversity.

*Parks are underfunded.* Public funding for many parks agencies has failed to keep pace with increasing visitor numbers and management costs, and the agencies are being compelled to recoup part of these costs from visitors and tour operators.

*Tourism is a large industry.* Whilst precise figures depend on definitions and

differ between countries, overall the tourism and travel sector makes up around 10% of the global economy. It is a huge and varied sector, a major earner of foreign exchange in many countries, and a major source of employment in rural and regional economies as well as cities and gateways.

*Tourism in parks is growing.* The scale and scope of commercial tourism activities in public protected areas continues to increase. This reflects three broad social trends: increasing total visitor numbers in parks; increasing range of recreational activities in parks; and increasing proportion of outdoor recreation carried out through commercial tour operators.

*Parks are valuable for tourism.* The natural environment provides major tourism attractions in the form of scenery, wildlife and wild flowers, and opportunities for outdoor activities. Whilst these attractions may occur on land under various private or public tenures, in most countries the best-known and most accessible are in public national parks. Parks provide commercial opportunities for tourism entrepreneurs in the form of high-quality attractions with publicly-funded access, infrastructure and marketing. They also provide major international market differentiation between tourism destinations.

*Tourism is fundamentally different from recreation.* Using parks for commercial profit differentiates commercial tourism operations from individual recreation, even if the activities are identical. There are three particularly important differences: (1) Legal obligations and liabilities are very different, especially in the event of personal injury or environmental impacts. This is one reason why commercial tourism operations need permits in almost all protected area systems. (2) Duties of protected area management agencies towards the general public, such as equity of access, do not necessarily apply to commercial entities such as tour operators. Even where a particular park allows a particular recreational activity by individuals, this implies no obligation to allow similar activities by tour operators. (3) Tourism is an industry which provides employment and income and maintains political lobbying organisations. If activities by individual visitors cause impacts in a particular area, parks agencies can close the area or restrict the activities. Where impacts are caused by commercial tourism, however, it is often extremely difficult for parks agencies to restrict their access or activities, not only because of contractual obligations, but because of political lobbying.

*Tourism can provide recreational experiences.* Because of large-scale social changes, an increasing number of people prefer to purchase guided and packaged nature and adventure tours, rather than undertaking the same activities as an individual. This commodification of recreation provides commercial opportunities for tour operators. Such tours can provide experiences of natural and cultural environments to people who might otherwise not enjoy them. However, they need not necessarily be in public protected areas; they may well be on private land or other public lands.

*Tour operators can provide valuable visitor interpretation.* Commercial tour operators have a valuable role to play in presenting and interpreting natural areas to visitors, as long as their activities are consistent with management objectives for particular protected areas.

*Park-use conflicts are increasingly commonplace.* Interactions, competition and sometimes conflicts between conservation, public recreation and commercial

tourism in national parks are becoming increasingly frequent in most countries. The same applies for conflicts between different recreational user groups, particularly between types of use with different levels of impact, such as those with motorised vehicles or livestock, and those without. Criteria are therefore needed to establish priorities for different uses in cases of conflict.

*Commercial tourism in public parks is a politically charged issue.* Many people in democratically governed nations hold strong opinions in regard to the use of publicly-funded parks for private profit.

*Parks and tourism have different goals.* The primary goal of private entrepreneurs is profit, in tourism as in any other industry sector. It is unrealistic to expect that a private profit-making entity would share the same goals as a public authority charged with broad and long-term responsibilities on behalf of an entire state, nation or the whole world.

*Commercial agreements aren't automatically win-win.* Commercial agreements between parks agencies and tour operators can be beneficial to both under appropriate conditions, but these conditions will not occur automatically. Without appropriate principles, the current political context in some countries risks a 'political firesale' of public protected areas to private commercial interests; or at best, continual conflicts and *ad hoc* decisions.

*These principles are for IUCN Category II protected areas.* The principles for tourism in protected areas proposed below are relevant to national parks in the sense most commonly used worldwide, i.e. at a level of protection equivalent to the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Category II, 'Ecosystem conservation and recreation'. Purpose, priorities and principles are different for other IUCN categories; and also for private land, land reserved for indigenous peoples and First Nations, and for public land under other forms of tenure, such as forestry, farming or unallocated Crown land.

## Supporting Information – Principles

*Parks are for conservation first.* The highest value of protected areas to human societies and economies is in maintaining supplies of breathable air, drinkable water and living biological diversity. Environmental conservation and ecological integrity are recognised as the highest management priorities in the establishing legislation for protected area systems in most countries and jurisdictions. Even where conservation is not the top priority in law, however, it is nonetheless the most valuable function of protected areas.

*Parks are for recreation second.* Recreation has major value for physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing of individuals. Public recreation is the second highest value use of protected areas for human societies and economies.

*Only low-impact recreation should be in parks.* There is now a very large global outdoor recreation industry which overlaps the clothing, specialist equipment manufacturing, entertainment and real estate sectors. Many forms of outdoor recreation, however, involve large-scale fixed infrastructure, motorised equipment, or horses and other riding animals or packstock, all of which can produce relatively high impacts on the natural environment and other park users. The same applies for some forms of non-motorised recreational equipment in some ecosystems, depending on the level of use and behaviour of the visitors. Recre-

ation is a valuable use of parks, but where recreation conflicts with primary conservation values, its type, timing, location and intensity must be managed to limit impacts. Management may include educational approaches.

*Tourism has no special right to parks.* Tourism interests have no preferential right of access or operation in protected areas, except as granted by the land management agency. Tourism operations in parks are a privilege, not a right. Tourism can be one valuable use of protected areas, but this is not the primary function of protected areas, and the social value of tourism is less than the value of conservation and public recreation.

*Planning for parks and tourism needs a regional ecosystem approach.* (a) Protected areas are the single most critical component in biodiversity conservation; but conservation measures are also needed outside parks, e.g. for additional habitat area, for animal corridors, and to reduce impacts on parks. (b) Parks are often icon attractions for nature tourism; but tourism accommodation and transport infrastructure are generally outside the park; many tourism activities and opportunities can be provided on other public and private lands nearby; and marketable tourism products generally require a suite of potential experiences of which activities in the park will be only one. (c) High-impact industrial or residential development near parks commonly affects both conservation and tourism. (d) The economic significance of nature and adventure tours is commonly small compared to that of associated resort-residential development, and this in turn is small compared to the economic scale of amenity migration in some regions. Where amenity migration is a significant factor, long-term economic effects of parks on neighbouring land values far outweigh short-term effects through tourism revenues.

*Partnerships need consent not coercion.* Partnerships between protected area management agencies and private commercial tourism interests can provide benefits for both in some circumstances; but only where all parties can decide freely whether or not to enter into any such partnership, and can negotiate freely on the terms of any agreement. Such agreements need to recognise that the aims and interests of tour operators and protected area management agencies may be very different, and provide for each to assist the other in reaching those different goals, without threatening the core priorities of either: i.e. ecosystem conservation and public recreation opportunities by protected area agencies, and commercial viability for tourism operations.

*Any user fees should reflect management costs including conservation impacts.* In different parks and jurisdictions there are commonly social, economic and legal arguments both for and against the imposition of user fees of various possible types, rates and applicability. The costs of managing a protected area for visitors include the costs of conservation management as well as the direct costs of visitor management and infrastructure. In some cases – e.g. the effects of accommodation on water quality – it is possible to distinguish impacts and management costs associated with commercial tourism, public recreation, and other anthropogenic influences both current and historical. In other cases – e.g. weed control – it may be very difficult to make such a distinction. Most protected area management agencies are public authorities which receive public funding to provide public benefits. Public benefits include conservation and public recreational opportunities. Commercial tourism is a private benefit, but where the

activities are similar to public recreation, the management costs may be hard to differentiate. Similar considerations apply, for example, to use of the public road network by vehicles used by individual or commercial transport respectively. Arguably, commercial users of protected areas should meet the full incremental or marginal management costs associated with that commercial use. In practice, however: (a) these costs are hard to define precisely; and (b) some small-scale commercial tours, though clearly distinct from private recreation in a legal sense, may be almost indistinguishable in a social sense. In practice, therefore, a system of commercial permits for smaller operators, and negotiated partnership agreements for larger operators, is generally the most workable approach. Any such system, however, must respect the overriding authority of the protected area management agency to determine whether commercial tourism is permitted, and if so under what conditions. It must also maintain the overriding management priority of ecosystem conservation.

*Tourism facilities in parks should provide a net benefit for conservation.* For example, facilities may decrease the impacts of existing uses or projected future uses, or provide educational opportunities which lead users to reduce their lifestyle environmental impacts.

*Commercial tour operators should meet all the costs they impose on parks.* This includes the costs of: (a) providing for their operations; (b) monitoring compliance with permit conditions and possible impacts; and (c) remediation of any impacts detected.

*Commercial tour operators should pay a resource rent.* That is, they should provide a return to the public, via protected area management agencies, for the privilege of conducting a private business on a public resource.

*Marketing should match park plans.* Permit conditions for commercial tourism in protected areas should include restrictions on marketing materials. This is needed to ensure that both the protected area and the tourism operation are presented accurately, and to allow strategic use of marketing as one component in visitor management.

*Parks agencies need a range of staff skills.* Protected area agencies need staff with specialist skills in visitor management and perhaps also tourism, economics and marketing, as well as ecology and natural resource management.

## Comments welcome

Responses, suggested improvements, and comments for discussion in the Research Forum should be submitted to the Research Notes Editor.

## Acknowledgements

A first version of these Principles was presented to the Australian Academy of Science Fenner Conference on Nature Tourism and the Environment, Canberra Australia, 3–6 September 2001. The version presented here is modified in response to comments from conference participants.

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