SUSTAINABILITY OF TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM

A BACKGROUND PAPER PREPARED FOR THE STATE SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY

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Abstract

Sustainable tourism is an aspect of sustainable development which was largely ignored until the mid 1990's. The industry is one of the world's largest growing, and generates considerable income and employment for populations. To ensure the Australian tourism industry moves towards sustainability and has a long term future it is vital environmental factors are seriously considered along with economic and social factors. Barriers to sustainability include a general lack of knowledge by the community, pockets of isolated research and too few guidelines and monitoring processes in place.

With improved training and education in sustainable development practices for those working and planning within the industry, collaborative research amongst interested parties such as tertiary institutions, government bodies, tour operators and community organisations then better sustainability practices are likely to result. A promising development in Australia is the formation of the Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism which has strong links with a world wide programme for sustainable travel and tourism known as Green Globe. This programme has great potential as it provides affiliation, benchmarking and certification for companies, communities and protected areas, so that participants are poised to make significant contributions to sustainability.

Introduction

Sustainability is not a new idea but a concept which has evolved over recent decades as a means to ensure consideration of the environment into all future decision making. It involves rethinking development to integrate environmental, economic and social goals. To be sustainable development must protect and restore ecological systems, improve economic efficiency and enhance the well being of the population. In the past the focus on sustainable development has tended to concentrate on conventional economic activity such as agriculture, mining, forestry, fisheries and manufacturing with exclusion of the tourism industry. (Weaver and Lawton, 2000). Significantly, this has altered in recent times and the tourism industry has taken steps to encourage sustainable tourism practices. It is recognised that changes of attitude and behaviour by both the community and planners in addition to further research into the issue is necessary.

Issue Analysis and description

Sustainability in the tourism sector was not seriously considered in the past for several reasons which include; firstly the perception that tourism does not involve the consumption of natural resources in the same manner as the agriculture, mining, forestry, fisheries and manufacturing industries do; secondly a mistaken belief that tourism is not a particularly important activity and thirdly; that the sector has not been especially visible nor stakeholders pro-active within the sustainable development debate (Weaver and Lawton, 2000).

Tourism is one of the world's largest and fastest growing industries with nature based tourism the fastest growing segment. Rather than being an economically marginal industry tourism accounts for about 6% of the world's cummulative GNP (Weaver and Lawton, 2000). Travel into Australia per year accounts for between 1 and 2% of world travel with 13% of Australian visits made to Western Australia (Crawford 2002).

CALM records 9 million visits annually to the conservation estate alone. Western Australian Tourism Commission (WATC) estimates indicate that 90% of tourism within the state is by Western Australians with tourists defined as people who travel more than 40 kms to stay somewhere overnight. Rather than exclude day trippers and

avoid the blurring which inevitably occurs to describe overseas, interstate and local people travelling in the long and short term the term visitors is preferred. Visitors may be classified as free and independent travellers where they make the choice of where to visit and when, or alternatively as visitors with commercial operators. Those travelling with commercial operators are subject to licencing rules and regulations more than free and independent travellers.

Nature tourism is defined as ecologically sustainable tourism with the primary focus on experiencing natural areas (eg visiting the Pinnacles) and eco-tourism as ecologically sustainable tourism with the primary focus on experiencing natural areas that foster environment and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation (eg. Landscope expeditions). Considerable employment opportunities exist for local populations, numerous facilities and services are required by visitors and the potential for large profit exists. Aboriginal land tenure is also a consideration as Aboriginal people have strong traditional and cultural links with the local environment.

The major sustainability issue related to tourism is to ensure the impact upon the environment is minimised while social and economic goals are achieved as the tourism industry continues to grow. The Precautionary Principle, which states that careful evaluation is necessary whenever practical to avoid serious or irreversible damage to the environment, needs to be considered before any future development. This principle is applied where a range of possible outcomes can not be predicted with confidence, when one or more outcomes could have extreme adverse implication for future generations and where no known substitutes for a resource exists (reference).

Numerous tourist sites within the state may be classified as public goods particularly those in remote and inaccessible areas, for example Purnululu National Park. Public goods are those which are non-rival and non-excludable so they have a zero opportunity cost of consumption. One person's consumption of a public good does not reduce the amount available for someone else (non-rivalry) and no one can be excluded from consuming a public good (non-excludability). Thus consumption by an individual in no way detracts from the public good's availability to others and consumers cannot be prevented from consuming it at reasonable cost so there are no private property rights. One of the major problems with public goods is that it is

difficult to insist people pay their 'personal price' for the good so it is often underprovided. Because public goods are available to all members of the community, the property rights are vague and this makes it difficult to ensure some are not spoiling the asset for others. Institutions are important in the management of natural resources as they are the rules upon which organised economic activity is based. They are humanly devised rules to shape behaviour and are constantly changing as circumstances and knowledge of the 'world' alters. They provide a framework for individuals to co-operate to their mutual advantage and adjust conflicting claims of different individuals and groups. A framework is necessary to be be put in place to ensure that like the natural environment, tourism is managed to be sustainable.

International focus on sustainable development increased as a result of the World Commission on Environment and Development during the late 1980's and continued to increase after the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Another World Summit scheduled for 2003 in Johannesburg is designed to take stock of accomplishments achieved since the Rio Summit. Sustainable tourism is simply one aspect of sustainable development but one which until the late 1990's remained largely hidden. Research is underway around the globe to consider the links between tourism and sustainable development (www.sustainabletravel.org) and within Australia the Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism has been established. This program was established to increase the competitiveness of Australia by strengthening collaborative links between industry, research organisations, educational instutions and relevant government agencies (www.crctourism.com.au).
Tourism is expected to continue to grow in Australia and the emerging Chinese market may have considerable future impact.

Several barriers exist which currently restrict sustainability within the tourism industry. The most important of these is a serious lack of community and industry awareness and education about the issue of sustainability. In addition many tourist sites have a distinct lack of interpretive signage which if present could help create awareness and educate the community. Numerous pockets of research are underway at university and tafe institutions however in many instances this research is conducted in isolation.

Tour operators, licensed through the Department of Conservation and Land Management, often perceive the role of CALM officers as 'environmental policemen' rather than officers willing to provide opportunities to assist them sustain their industry. In addition some operators fail to recognise the the need for sustainablity within their own market niche and only see the need for sustainability in the nature based and ecotourism markets.

No guidelines are in place to determine the carrying capacity of tourism sites which further creates an air of uncertainty given the seasonal nature of the tourist industry. A monitoring system to assess guidelines and standards of sustainability for current and future tourist sites is also lacking.

Local communities are often not considered in the development of tourism sites and could easily be involved from the outset. Currently the Kimberly Land Council is considering a legal challenge to tour operators within the region and will not allow entry to special sites unles a local guide is present (Quartermaine, 2002). Had the local community been involved from the outset of the tourism venture, compromise positions and licence conditions could have been established between interested parties beforehand.

Existing Action

Currently several bodies within the tourist industry are approaching the issue of sustainability seriously and seeking ways to support the industry better. Examples include the W.A. Tourism Commission which is building on the Nature Based Tourism Strategy it released in 1997 and its financial support of the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP). NEAP was developed in 1991 for the tourism industry by the industry with a focus on nature tourism and ecotourism, and results in product accreditation for a particular tour. The programme is business based and requires permits, insurance, licencing, a business plan, training and emergency routines in place before accreditation is possible.

The Forum Advocating Cultural and Eco Tourism (FACET) is a Western Australian based network and information resource for those in the community with an interest

in cultural, nature-based and eco-tourism. This association has organised annual conferences, regular meetings and newsletters to promote sustainability and the need for careful management of cultural and ecological resources for tourism within the community.

The Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management ensures that commercial tourist operators acting within lands vested in the National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority and waters vested in the Marine Parks and Reserves Aurthority are licenced. In addition rangers are employed within some of these sites to ensure our national, conservation and marine parks, State forests, nature reserves and native plants and animals are conserved and managed for sustainable use.

The Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism is committed to developing Australia's long term tourism research capacities through a vigorous research education program. This integrated, multidisciplinary research program focuses on the four key areas of Tourism and conservation and environmental management, Tourist and engineering, design and technology, Tourism and policy, events and business management and Tourism and IT and informatics. It also aims to diffuse its research through to industy via a variety of means (www.crctourism.com.au).

Some examples of best practice situations locally, include Fairbridge Farm, the Treetop Walk in the South West, Geikie Gorge just out of Fitzroy Crossing and an overseas example is the Aspen Skiing Company in Aspen.
Fairbridge Farm is a non-profit charitable youth and environmental organisation located in the South West of Western Australia. Originally the farm housed British children and trained them for a farm life, however in recent years its focus has shifted to include environmental and outdoor adventure activities within a sustainable use framework. The farm currently practices and trains young people in landcare, river restoration, tree planting, recycling, provision of alternative energy sources and sustainable farming practices (www.fairbridge.asn.au).

The Treetop Walk situated in the Valley of the Giants, is a walkway built up off the ground to enhance the view and reduce the impact of tourism. Tracks already in existence had become heavily compacted through the sheer volume of tourist traffic

so the treetop walkway is consistent with policies of CALM to coax visitors towards facilities, close tracks experiencing too much traffic and generally manage visitors for sustainability of the site.

CALM and the local Aboriginal community operate cruise vessels to Geikie Gorge situated out from Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley district. The number of cruises per day is limited and access to Aboriginal cultural sites is not permitted unless bookings are made through the Aboriginal Corporation's Heritage Cruise.
The number of tourist operators is limited, private vessels can only be launched after the CALM/Heritage Cruises have returned for the day and the mooring area is closely controlled.

Overseas, the Aspen Skiing Co. is regarded as a good example of sustainability within the skiing industry, something many thought impossible to achieve (www.sustainabiletravel.org). Millions of visitors arrive at the site annually so the tourist operation affects wildlife, traffic patterns, air quality, streamflows and virtually every part of local environment is filled during the peak period. The company has been able to demonstrate leadership in promoting sustainable practices and although it still has a long way to go, has been the recipient of numerous sustainability awards. Wastes have been reduced, improved resource efficiency has been achieved, building and maintence events are avoided during the mating/nesting seasons of wildlife and employees have been encouraged to contribute to local environmental causes. Through the introduction of sustainable practices benefits have been provided to the company, the local community and to customers.

Strategies for Change
To enhance sustainability within the tourism industry numerous strategies could be adopted and those currently in place refined. The greatest changes could be brought about through education to provide training in sustainable practices for community members, tourism operators and government bodies. Strong partnerships and effective collaboration between interested parties such as government bodies, research institutions, tertiary students, community organisations, and tourist operators if developed further, would enhance sustainability practices and ensure the long term

future of the industry. These strategies could comfortably be put into place in the short and medium term provided funding is made available.

Further research into case studies illustrating sustainable practices would provide greater opportunities for newcomers into the industry to follow and demonstrate practical application of the triple bottom line approach. Interpretative signage at tourist sites and public education to encourage members of the community to accept responsibility for the sustainability of sites would further assist. This could be achieved in the medium term perhaps through rewarding responsible behaviour and further development of the 'user contributes' policy introduced by CALM.

A framework for licencing all tour operators could be established then strengthened so that realistic sanctions apply if operating conditions are not met. Different tourism interests may require different types of registration, for example some may be registered as a business, others as individuals or by destination site but each would be required to meet similar conditions, for example to include a prepared management plan, signed memorandums of understanding, and completion of a tour operators course prior to licencing. CALM is currently developing such a course in an online format (Quartermaine, 2002). Each of these strategies while worthwhile is unlikely to reach its' maximum potential in isolation hence a co ordinated approach is desirable.

Steps have already been taken to provide a comprehensive long term global approach with Australian involvement being achieved through the Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism. Together with the World Travel and Tourism Council and other international tourism organisations a world wide programme for sustainable travel and tourism for the 21st century has been established and is known as Green Globe (www.greenglobe21.com). Green Globe provides a global environmental benchmarking, certification and improvement system for established groups and newcomers to the industry so that triple bottom line requirements, demonstrating environmental, social and economic responsibilities, can be met.

Initially companies, communities and protected areas may register as an affiliate to learn more about Green Globe, how to improve sustainability, reduce costs and enhance their green market appeal then to prepare for Benchmarking and

Certification. Prior to Benchmarking, an assessment is completed so that indicators of sustainability, for example energy consumption, waste generation and water consumption, are measured and required guidelines met..Certification is achieved after assessment by independent and accredited audit ('C') companies. Participants are supported in their efforts working towards a best practice level and throughout their involvment, by universities developing further expertise in sustainable tourism strategies and advice from a variety of international and national advisory councils.

Financial commitment in the long term is required from Governments, protective agencies and members of the community to achieve an integrated and systematic approach to sustainable tourism. To obtain some measure of the advantages and disadvantages of the various strategies for change, comprehensive cost-benefit analysis should be conducted. This method of analysis, developed to provide information for use in decision making, can be applied to sustainable tourism where significant savings achieved through Green management and the social impacts of practices which are not sustainable may be measured.

Measuring Progress
In order to ensure the correct pathway has been taken towards sustainability, progress measurement should be continual. Currently, State of the Environment reports are written annually and may provide a regular source of information concerning the number of species in an area, number of visitors to a site, impact visitors have made to a site, number of new signposts and other visible measures.
Currently both the W.A. Tourism Council and the Department of Conservation and Land Management are developing guidelines to estimate the carrying capacity for various sites and to recognise the limits of acceptable change. Once these parameters are documented rules may be put in place to ensure tourist sites are being managed for sustainability.

Already documented and readily available is the Green Globe Benchmarking process. The system is simple, practical and any changes can be rapidly interpreted. Key performance areas for benchmarking have been identified and include environmental and social sustainability, energy consumption, reduced greenhouse emissions,

management of fresh water resources, solid and liquid waste generation, social commitment, ecosystem conservation and management, and land management. Benchmarking involves the routine collection of environmental performance measures, then reporting this information annually for Green Globe analysis. Analysis then determines how the operation has performed relative to Green Globe Benchmarking already established for the industry, and can assess whether the performance is above or below baseline standards. Below baseline is recognised as unacceptable environmental performance and areas requiring improvement are identified while above this baseline level is an estimate of best practice and recommendations may be made for areas of further improvement.

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