

WORKSHOP SESSION THREE

REEF TOURISM AND NATIONAL PARKS

(Chairman: Dr Des Connell, School of Australian  
Environmental Studies, Griffith University)

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Tourism and the Environment  
of the Great Barrier Reef  
and Coastal Areas

by

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A Hundred Islands for the Price of One - A Place to  
Come Back From Feeling As Though You Need a Holiday - Just a  
Drop in the Ocean - etc., etc.

All good catch phrases are part of the schemes  
involving segmentation of the marketplace, but each of us is  
responsible for peoples' enjoyment of one of the special  
natural areas of the world - The Great Barrier Reef.

How we go about protecting this resource asset, and at  
the same time ensure that it is used to its maximum for the  
benefit of human experiences, can be summed up in the United  
States National Parks Service philosophy -

PRESERVATION + USE = CONSERVATION

Why did the tourists come? Let's just think back.  
One of our islands was a retreat for a businessman escaping  
pressures of the city, another was a grazing property, others  
turtle factories, and the first tourists came because they were  
inquisitive and wanted to experience the idyllic life of the  
islands, to get away from the "rat race" of the mainland.

Today I believe people are still coming for exactly  
the same reasons, but instead of just coming from areas along  
the Queensland coast, they are coming from all over the world.  
As the world as we know it has become more and more urban, the  
need for people to get away to natural areas is becoming  
greater. So of course are the tourist areas that they can  
visit.

It is therefore, I believe, incumbent upon us to be fully aware of the major natural asset that is ours - The Great Barrier Reef. Surely this is the one thing that separates us from the rest of the world's similar resorts? And if in fact this is what is drawing people from overseas and Australia - are we using it sufficiently and correctly, thus protecting our asset?

#### PRESERVATION + USE = CONSERVATION

It's a simple formula but of course it won't work unless people want it to. If we want the Reef and the islands to survive, then we must use them wisely. Whether we are talking about the coral, the myriads of fish, or the abundance of trees and bird life on the islands, we must realise that they are fragile and irreplaceable and incorrect or ill-informed "use" instead of assisting with conservation can assist in total destruction.

Already the signs that we are not doing our job in preserving our asset are there. Walk or snorkel along a well walked reef trail area, where boats anchor when visiting the Reef, and you will find soft drink cans, plastic bags and general litter. Wander along any one of the well advertised island-beaches and you are bound to find the inevitable broken stubbies.

One of our opportunities in this industry is to bring man and his environment into closer harmony. We have an opportunity of not only preserving our own areas (and assets) while the visitor is under the spell of the Reef, but also by doing so, enhancing his holiday, and thereby creating the desire for him to return to this environment in the future.

So you can see that if you accept this responsibility there is a pay-off. The benefit to the environment is that we may have created a person with a new awareness who on his way home, will see the contrast between the cities and the farms, between the clouds gathered on the mountain tops and the pollution hovering over the city.

The final pay-off is of course the person who sees the difference between the high-rise holidays and the plastic worlds of make-believe and the relaxed, clean environment of the islands.

## IS THIS OUR RESPONSIBILITY?

In the past, the original island people (the Nicolson's, the Mountney's, the Poulson's, the MacLean's, etc) all ran small, informal resorts and had the time to be with each individual guest. They provided "interpretation" as it's known today. But who has replaced them?

The need today is greater than it was then. Just the sheer weight of numbers and the fact that we are dealing with the inquisitive and not just the converted - "Can I take home this lump of coral? It was broken anyway". "I'd just love to have that shell for my mantelpiece." "Well there's nobody here to stop me anyway." I guess if we listened hard we would hear these comments dozens of times a day, but is this our responsibility? Shouldn't this be the government's job? We get back to why are the tourists here? We are providing an opportunity for tourists to enjoy and relax in the environment, therefore the environment is an asset and a reason, and I believe, a responsibility.

One way of achieving some of these goals and ensuring that the expertise is available to everybody so that the information disseminated is accurate, is to form an organisation incorporating the private enterprise people running the islands, the government, semi-government, and authorities involved in the area. This organisation is called the Great Barrier Reef Parks Association.

It seems coincidental but relevant that one could describe the purpose of the Great Barrier Reef Parks Association in almost identical terms used to describe interpretation. They are:

- (a) to enhance the visitors enjoyment;
- (b) to inform and educate the visitor about the resource as a whole;
- (c) to relate the resource to the experience of the visitors; and
- (d) to protect the resource.

The organisation was formed during 1978 and the different authorities have advised they are enthusiastic to see all tourist establishments form their own branches for their specific area. Of course the governmental authorities will change from area to area, however we can be assured of their co-operation as the organisation is of benefit to everyone. Those who have formed Chapters are seeing the benefits in various areas of assistance.

Already a few of the resorts have lightly touched the areas of interpretation with displays of memorabilia - flora, fauna and shell exhibits, orientation walks, and boat trips. However we need to go further. Accuracy in interpretation is needed. On four islands I have heard four different stories of the Reef, all conflicting. As a result, the credibility of the resorts as environmentally aware places was questioned in my mind, and no doubt any other visitors with similar experiences.

With the assistance of the Association, accurate inexpensive pamphlets can be prepared for distribution to the public. Assistance with training of specialised personnel can be gained, as can the preparation of environmental programs.

The title of Entertainment Officer takes on new meaning. For interpretation is not merely being an entertainer, it is a communication art designed to reveal meaning and significance. He is a conveyor of practical history in artistic perspective, a naturalist showing the inter-relations of systems and their components, a nature guide focusing on the wonders of the natural resource, an educator trying to increase understanding and influence behaviour, an information specialist emphasizing public relations, a community singing leader gathering a group around a camp fire, or just one of the kids sitting in a circle telling a story.

Of course he has to be all of this for it is his job to meet and work with the average visitor.

Average visitor? That's the mythical character that doesn't really exist. Our visitors differ widely in ages, educational attainment, interests and goals to be achieved within the natural leisure setting. Many come only to enjoy a social outing, but nearly all visitors have experiences influenced to some degree by sociability. This is part of the job of your interpreter (Entertainment Officer) but is this just a job, or is it a responsibility we have, not only to the tourists but the area that we purport to represent?

It would seem when you take a close look at us that we are not far removed from the turtle factory owners of the old days - taking everything and giving nothing back. We use the area, or should I say "abuse" the area. If we are going to take the wonders of nature and sell them as a commodity, then we have a responsibility to service that commodity.

Perhaps through an awareness of the environment we will be able to present a single front to the world of tourism. Who's ever heard of Thunderbird Lodge? Probably no-one in the room, but I am sure you have all heard of the Grand Canyon. Heard of Ahwahnee Hotel? No? But I'm sure everyone knows about Yosemite National Park.

In our case its almost the opposite. This area which represents a combination of some of the most scenic parks and places in the world continues to present itself as a fragmented, hotch-potch of little developments that put out in small quantities, hundreds of different brochures and magazines that are not good enough in quality to do justice to the magnificence of the area. The result, according to the Australian Tourist Commission figures, is that of all overseas entrants through Sydney airport, only 4% get to visit the Reef.

It's quite obvious that we can expect an increase in the number of tourists coming into this country, not only because of cheap fares but also increased affluence in other societies.

It is generally obvious through changes in schooling at all levels, and general increased awareness of the environment, that the travelling population is more environmentally aware than it has ever been. Let us become aware of the great natural wonder that we have in this area. Let us not be fragmented but stand together and present to the rest of the world, one of its highlights. Obviously it is going to cost each and everyone of us a little more to create the environmental awareness that is needed through increased programs and the establishment of a single image, but the returns to us could be far in excess of those we are currently envisaging or receiving.

Why do we expect people to pass over Fiji, Tahiti, Honolulu, Mauritius and similar places to come to this area, unless we can give them something really special?

At this point of time, I do not believe we are delivering the goods, but I do believe we have the potential to do so. Equally, one might say in these days of cheap airfares: why should Australians stay at home when even to them we do not present the image that we should?

Perhaps in the philosophy of

PRESERVATION + USE = CONSERVATION

lies the secret. Not only the conservation of the living things of our area, but the conservation of our industry.

Discussion (Chairman - Dr Des Connell)

GORDON MCKAUGE, Laroc Pty Ltd: I'd like to compliment you on an excellent paper. It has an obvious deep awareness of what we know of the Reef and the attitudes of people to the Reef. I agree wholeheartedly that we must all be telling the same story, but we must tell people about the Reef in a way which excites them, which gives them something with which they can associate. For instance, they can associate coral polyps with animals. People should not be told just what academics decide they should be told.

JOHN LUSCOMBE: Thank you, I agree and I'll answer your statement which I think is important. You refer to academics; I used to dislike, distrust, and was not very strong on them at all, as most of them will tell you. We're not talking about academics any more. We're talking about interpreters. There is a difference.

Interpretation is a creative art. These guys are professional interpreters. I've been to some of their courses and had the privilege of working with them. They study what the people want. That's their job. They're not the bachelors or scientists and the Doctors and the Masters that we're perhaps used-to-coming across in our resorts in our areas. They are a special breed of people of their own. Each of the Departments has their own interpreters. If you've ever gone with the famous turtle man for a walk at night, nobody could ever call him academic. He might be, he certainly is. I'm talking about Col Limpus, from Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, but the thorough and total enjoyment you get from being with them and you only get that by them knowing the academic facts and then being able to put them across. That's interpretation. You'll have Peter Ogilvie from Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service up here shortly. You'll get the message one way or the other. Pete's probably the best interpreter in our State. He's heard me say it openly so many times now, he's going to be all nice and embarrassed. He's an academic but he's an interpreter, so please don't mistake what I'm saying when I say the Departments will give you the information. Their interpretive and specialist services will give you the information, written in a simple form that people can understand, but also it's like anything that you give, if you want a kid to swallow something miserable, you put a lot of sugar on it. We still want the message to get through. Don't let's cloud it with thinking that we're comedians and entertainers. Sure that's part of our job. But part of it's to get out this stuff that people know about. Just get that little bit of information that makes a wonder out of it.

JOHN PIGRAM, University of New England: I wanted to take up a comment that you made in relation to something I said yesterday, about that very important component of the tourist population, the kids. I was suggesting yesterday that we should promote more to the kids. In my view they are very influential decision makers. You have brought out a very important point: that if we want to promote environmental awareness, the most environmentally aware segment of the population today are the kids.

JOHN LUSCOMBE: I agree entirely of course. I didn't mention children a lot because I wouldn't like to advertise Lindeman's environmental program in front of everybody.

GERRY SUTTON, North Brisbane College of Advanced Education: I'm in the business of training young people to serve in this area of environmental education. Are your requirements open to us? I have 54 people between the ages of 17 and 35 who are wanting jobs at some of your establishments. Right now they're learning how to teach and to react to people in a fairly nice way. Are your entrepreneurs open to invitation to show us what you want.

JOHN LUSCOMBE: I'd like to clarify that. Gerry Sutton is not job seeking. We have two of the students coming with us to help us with a program on children and the environment. We're giving them lodging and transport, but they put their own time in. Sutton's people need a lot more tourist areas where entrepreneurs who are genuinely keen on doing something about their environment, are prepared to accommodate one or two of them, preferably in pairs, because they don't feel lonely then. Put them up and let them work with you for three weeks on a specific interpretative project. It'll help you a little in the short term. If you want to do this, please see Gerry, I can guarantee they're good people. Help them - maybe it'll help us in the long term.