National Parks and Tourism in the Great Barrier Reef Province

by

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1. SUMMARY

The Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service is responsible for a significant national park estate in the Great Barrier Reef province. It also has a broader mandate in the area, that of nature conservation within the framework of the several Acts it administers.

A sizeable percentage of Barrier Reef tourist resorts are located on islands which are wholly or partially declared national parks. How each park and its associated tourist facility interact is a matter of considerable importance to both parties and to the visiting public. The relationship should be harmonious or, to borrow biological terms, it should be a symbiotic relationship rather than a parasitic one.

The natural resources of any island are limited and isolated to varying degrees. They are invariably more susceptible to human interference and less capable of absorbing the many by-products of our society. There are many limiting factors which must be recognised as such in any planned development. This raises the concept of carrying capacity. How many visitors can an island absorb without the resources being significantly degraded and the quality of the visitor's experience being impaired? The answers aren't readily available, but this in no way negates the question.

When a national park island becomes a tourist destination, a need for active resource management is generated. Ideally this sort of management should relate to the island as a whole and to groups of islands as a region. It is probably stating the obvious to say that resource management and resort management on islands have their own special problems.

Many of these problems derive from a lack of, or a breakdown in, communication. The National Parks and Wildlife Service and the tourist industry must encourage more dialogue and establish more common objectives. One party is dedicated to the conservation of our natural resources whilst the other relies on these resources for its livelihood.

A national park shouldn't be seen as an appendage to a resort, something to expand, to utilise, to grab bits from. There is a limit to that expansion. If expansion or pressure for that expansion goes beyond a certain point, then the Parks Service must decide whether it's worthwhile retaining that area as a national park at all or simply saying, "Right, take it, and we will leave it". That decision depends on our objectives for that region, but there must be a limit beyond which expansion and development of tourist facilities has to stop. Unfortunately the words "National Park" do not come up very much in the publicity that the tourist industry puts out in relation to the islands even though eighty percent of the island resorts are on national park islands. To use an example, a Queensland Government Tourist Bureau publication lists a whole series of islands to visit, the only ones on the Reef that aren't national parks are Daydream and Hayman, but there's no mention of the word "National Park". Now that's surprising because to the overseas visitor, particularly the American, the term national park means something. They will come to an area that's a national park because there are certain values that they can be sure of getting.

3. RESORTS AND THE QUEENSLAND NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE SERVICE

The relationship between resort guests and day visitors is one we have to address ourselves to. That was referred to in Stephen Le Page's excellent talk yesterday. (I think one of the most thought provoking talks that this workshop has received.) The love-hate relationship between tourist resorts and the research person, or the academic I suppose was the word that was used here today, is an interesting one. It's an unfortunate one in many cases. The researcher can produce a lot of very valuable information for the tourist resort to use in interpretive work in getting information across to the guests. There are many other problems: the management of garbage disposal; sewage; access facilities, and so on. I find there are problems in communication within the tourist resort itself. The smaller the situation, the smaller the island, the less communication that seems to occur between individuals. It may be because the division of labour and in many cases on island resorts, the division is such that the people are involved in specific tasks for which they have the expertise. For example, anyone can drive a bus or a car at a mainland resort but not anyone can drive a 50 or 60 foot boat, so that person is a specialist.

legislation. We will not get a marine park declared, as long as there's the prospect of oil drilling. Now to me it seems that if the entire Barrier Reef Region is a managed area, a marine park under this legislation, you have potentially the world's greatest tourist attraction. People know about the Reef. If as other speakers have said, they know the Reef is going to be a park, a really special area, it's a tremendous promotional asset. So it seems to me the question of oil drilling is directly linked to tourism in this country.

ANGUS INNES, Member for Sherwood: This is a comment, inviting further comment evoked from John Luscombe's and Peter Ogilvie's contributions. The emphasis has been on the provision of interpretive facilities, and the provision of skilled interpretive officers. I spent a couple of hours with the Director of National Parks in Victoria about four weeks ago. He says that in their Service they've attempted to build on a localised basis with a manager-general within the Service and other officers below recruited from the local area. As he says, the people most valuable to have on side are the locals who can be the eyes and ears of the Service and look upon the resource as the source of their living. Wouldn't it be best for your Service to recruit and develop interpretive officers and train personnel from within the local area?

PETER OGILVIE: Everyone is an interpreter in some way or another. Everyone carries out interpretation when in contact with anyone else. You're interpreting. You're trying to put a message across. You're trying to convince us of some of your ideas, your approach. In that sense, local people are obviously the best. Nevertheless interpretation involves certain other skills. Either we can assist local people in training to use those skills or we can provide interpreters ourselves. Interpretation must get a truthful message across. Sometimes the message is not as truthful as it could be. That's not to say the person is purposely putting across a wrong interpretation, but unfortunately sometimes that person hasn't got the right information. Quite often one's interpretation is made up or is embellished a little bit by personal bias. Now sometimes that doesn't do too much harm, but in the long term I think it does.

JOHN LUSCOMBE: I would agree with employing local interpreters. I would ask you who's going to pay for them - the National Parks Service, or the resorts? I think a few of us make a mistake when we think about interpretation. I get the feeling the questioner is thinking about salesmen a little bit. Interpreters aren't salesmen. Mothers are not salesmen, yet when babies are born, they very quickly interpret their need for milk. That's interpretation. It doesn't take long to