



Understanding nature-based tourism – No 2

Defining ‘Nature Tourism’: meaning, value and boundaries

‘Nature tourism’ is not a term commonly used by visitors. It is not seen to be a holiday type in its own right – almost no-one speaks of taking a “nature-based holiday” or trip, just as few people would describe themselves as cultural tourists! Instead it is a term of value to the tourism industry in the context of visitor desires, experiences and activities.

Nature in tourism

In its broadest sense, nature in tourism involves experiencing natural places, typically through outdoor activities that are sustainable in terms of their impact on the environment.

These can range from active to passive and include everything from bushwalking and adventure tourism experiences to sightseeing, scenic driving, beach experiences and wildlife viewing. In many instances a visitor may combine several of these in the one trip.

For keen outdoor enthusiasts, and there are many, the great majority of adventure activities (see lists below) directly depend on nature and natural environments for their successful conduct. Fundamentally, the role of nature can vary from ‘crucial to the visitor experience’ to ‘enhances the visitor experience’ - particularly in relation to such variables as active or passive measures of the activity involved.

For passive and active visitors alike, nature is also playing an increasingly important role in giving something back to people (relaxing, enriching the spirit, getting back to basics). By doing so, it is able to enhance their broader experience of a destination. And for mainstream domestic visitors, these benefits tap more accurately into nature’s deeper meaning - see resource paper No 3, *The deeper significance and role of ‘nature’ in tourism*.

Nature-based experiences are intimately linked to all other aspects of the visitor’s total experience of a destination, such as food, culture, relaxation, health, escape, family needs, accommodation, transport, etc. All serve to complement each other and together form the basis of a visitor’s overall satisfaction with their holiday.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is ecologically sustainable tourism, with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas, that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation (*Ecotourism Association of Australia*).

Ecotourists, with their strong focus on learning about the natural environment, minimising negative impacts and contributing to its care, lie at one specialist end of the nature in tourism spectrum, albeit an important one. They are in effect ambassadors (or early adopters) for a set of personal values towards which it now appears many other market segments, potentially comprising much larger visitor numbers, are moving.

Conserved and protected areas (including Marine and National Parks), the Earth’s biodiversity, and respect for local culture and those who have been traditional guardians of our natural environments, can be central to their interests.

Ecotourists are also characterised by knowing what they want and being strongly self-active in accessing it. They will often plan and book their experiences and travel needs themselves, leaving tourism operators with more time and the broader opportunity to pursue tourists with more mainstream nature-based interests, and those seeking adventure activity.



Soft and hard adventure tourism

Soft and hard adventure tourism activities also comprise a subset of activities strongly associated with the natural environment and nature-based tourism. Related market segments include 'adventure sports' such as mountain biking.

Anecdotal evidence from Australian tourism operators suggests that demand for both soft and hard adventure tourism is growing. Research suggests that spending by nature-based tourists (particularly those with an interest in adventure activities and visiting significant nature destinations including national parks) is often substantially above average, per visitor and per night (*Tourism Tasmania: Nature-based Tourism Report: 1998-99 Update*).

It is important to recognise that international source markets can culturally differ over which activities they will describe as 'soft' and which as 'hard' (e.g. snorkelling, surfing, ballooning and orienteering may be viewed as soft by one market and hard by another). Similarly, differences in outlook can arise between younger and older visitors from the same source market. For many major international markets (e.g. Asian and American), soft activities rather than hard are more frequently preferred by those interested in adventure-based experiences in natural areas.

Soft adventure activities commonly require a moderate level of physical involvement by participants and are less physically challenging than hard activities. They can include – hiking/bushwalking, mountain biking/bicycling, camping, horseback riding, orienteering, walking tours, wildlife spotting, whale watching, river and lake canoeing and fishing.

The numbers undertaking such activities can be substantial – e.g. the NSW Fisheries estimates that recreational fishing is enjoyed by over 1 million New South Wales residents each year, as well as around 300,000 visiting anglers. There is evidence from leading natural destinations that bushwalking activity rates are also significantly increasing, particularly when support facilities are good, with highest participation rates in the 'under 2 hours' and '2 hours to a full day' categories. Wildlife viewing also achieves high levels of participation.

Hard adventure activities commonly involve a higher level of physical or rugged involvement or a potentially greater personal challenge for participants. The risk factor can also increase. Hard adventure activities with a nature basis or need include – caving, scuba diving, trekking, white water rafting, kayaking, rock and mountain climbing, cross-country skiing, safaris, surfing, windsurfing, ballooning and ocean sailing.

By contrast, bungee jumping (for example) does not depend on a nature setting.

At the more challenging end of the hard adventure scale, support equipment can be involved or be absolutely necessary - e.g. climbing gear, oxygen tanks, ocean-going kayaks.

Special interest tourism

Nature-based tourism and its various subsets can also encompass some particularly challenging, but potentially high spending, special interest market segments. These often comprise socially and environmentally aware, highly educated and potentially demanding visitors who travel both to learn and to achieve personal and social goals.

Most of these visitors are serviced and targeted by specialist tourism operators and suppliers who often provide highly expert guides as part of the service.

Examples include the 'not for profit' travel sector in the United States whose interests can range widely, encompassing anything from wildlife expeditions to scientific and cultural tours. The major non-profit institutions of North America, such as natural history museums, zoos, universities and botanical societies, commonly promote their own world-wide travel programs to membership,



alumni and donor bases that can run into the millions. Accessing and converting their small groups (approximately 5 to 20 people) travel market can be difficult. It takes time, effort and a great commitment to high quality standards and delivery.

An equally dedicated nature-based special interest visitor segment exists with bird-watching. Enthusiasts will travel long distances (and often at short notice) to sometimes remote and hard-to-access destinations, in order to sight new and rare species. In addition, readily identifiable communication channels (such as the ornithologists' special interest newsletters) can exist for accessing such market segments.

Wildlife tourism

Wildlife tourism involves travel to observe wildlife in natural environments and preferably their native habitat. It is a further subset of nature tourism and one in which significantly high levels of domestic and international interest exist. Wildlife tourism involves wild and non domesticated animals and can encompass free-ranging and captive circumstances.

Given the unique character and special appeal of most of Australia's wildlife, this suggests it may represent a tourism opportunity area for some destinations. The Blue Mountains, Barrington Tops, North and South Coast areas and Outback New South Wales possess great potential in this regard given their species diversity and relative convenience as destinations from major source markets and ports of entry.

Wildlife tourism encompasses the chance to encounter fauna (and flora) in terrestrial, aquatic/marine and aerial settings and to gain some further understanding of a wide variety of species (including viewing kangaroos, koalas, whales, dolphins, seals, fish and birds). Undertaking this activity in a manner that is environmentally responsible is important to ensure less disturbance to wildlife and habitats.

In terms of major visitor trends, 'appreciative tourism' involving observation, photography and interaction with wild animals is large scale, prominent and growing. Consumptive tourism involving such activities as hunting and (non-catch and release) fishing is also large scale, but declining (*Paul Eagles, Sustainable Wildlife Tourism Convention, Hobart, 2001*).

Ideally, wildlife tourism should include some element of education and an increased appreciation of nature and conservation issues. Potential new models for wildlife tourism in Australia are being developed. These involve wildlife sanctuaries with feral free habitats attempting to use tourism and other enterprise based revenue sources as a means to help protect endangered native species and develop recovery plans for the species.

Activities directly related to wildlife viewing, such as scuba diving and whale watching, are experiencing rapid world-wide growth in popularity and it is clear that the concept of wildlife viewing itself is gaining global currency with visitors. It has been estimated to generate \$30 billion worldwide in revenues each year (*Lindberg, 1991, quoted in Ecotourism Research Paper No 10, 1997, of the Wildlife Development Series published by The International Ecotourism Society*).

Alaska has experienced strong tourism growth in recent years, particularly in wildlife tourism, with more than 46% of its visitors engaging in this activity (*Tourism Tasmania, Nature: The leading edge for regional Australia, 2000*).

Nationally in the USA, wildlife viewing is the third highest purpose for trips each year (671 million) after sightseeing (1037 million) and family gatherings (778 million). It is expected that wildlife activities will increase 61% nationally over the next 52 years to Year 2050 (*Outdoor Recreation in American Life: A National Assessment of Demand and Supply Trends, 1999 – quoted in Nature: The leading edge for regional Australia*).

43% of Canadians are involved in outdoor recreation each year and 18.6% have a wildlife component to their trip. 74.5% watch wildlife on the media and this is a major influence on driving wildlife tourism.



The worldwide value of whale watching is estimated at over \$2 billion. In Australia it has been estimated to generate \$100 million with almost one million people watching each year. In New South Wales alone, more than 200,000 people annually pay for whale watching tours – double the number of 10 years ago (*International Fund for Animal Welfare, cited in Daily Telegraph, 25 June 2001*).

Wildlife tourism should also seek to maximise the benefits to local communities, while avoiding problems such as disturbance to wildlife and pollution. Types and magnitudes of environmental impacts associated with wildlife tourism vary with the type of tourist activity pursued – some impacts are obvious and easily identifiable while others are indirect and difficult to quantify. The impacts on particular animals should not be considered in isolation from the broader environmental settings and wider animal population.

The conservation benefits of wildlife tourism can include – its financial contribution; practical (in kind) contribution; socio-economic incentive for conservation; and education.

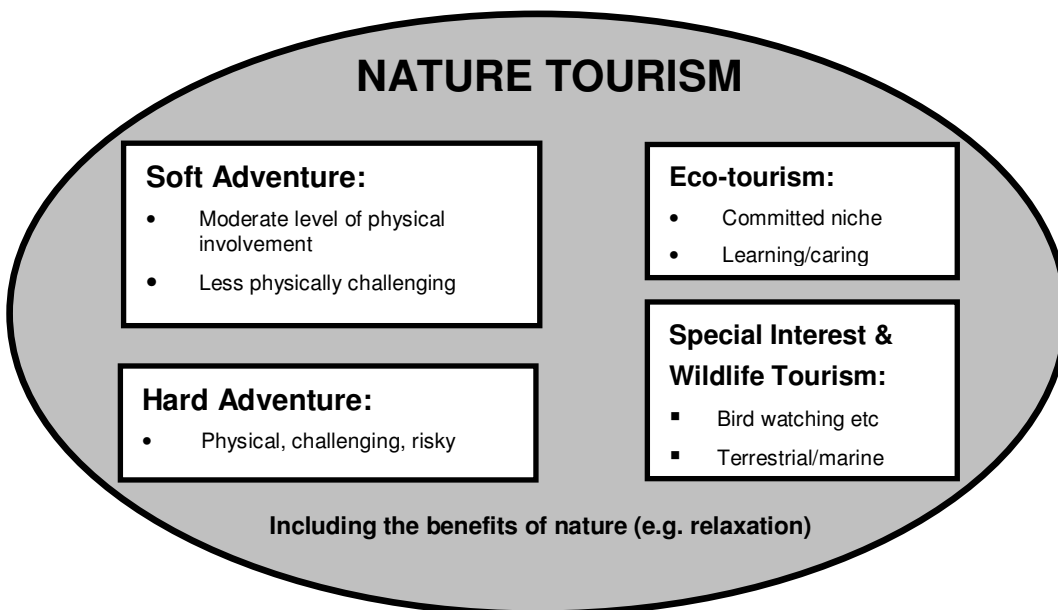
Sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism is envisaged by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) as “leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems”.

Sustainable tourism might also be defined as “tourism which is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community” (*Sustainable tourism management, J. Swarbrooke*).

Furthermore, “A clear distinction should be made between the concepts of ecotourism and sustainable tourism: the term ecotourism itself refers to a segment within the tourism sector, while the sustainability principles should apply to all types of tourism activities, operations, establishments and projects, including conventional and alternative forms” (*International Year of Ecotourism 2002*).

The goal of ‘ecologically sustainable development’ is to improve the total quality of life, both now and in the future, in a way that maintains the ecological processes on which life depends (*National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development, 1992, AGPS, Canberra*).



Nature in tourism embraces what is commonly termed ‘nature tourism’ and its various subsets, plus the wider visitor benefits provided by nature.

Nature may be crucial to the experience or it may enhance the experience.



Supplementary definitions with significant relevance to nature in tourism

Geotourism

Geotourism is concerned with sustaining or enhancing a destination's geographic character – the entire combination of natural and human attributes that make one place distinct from another. Geotourism encompasses both cultural and environmental concerns regarding travel, as well as the local impact tourism has upon communities and their individual economies and lifestyles. Aesthetics, heritage and the well-being of residents are included as some of its concerns.

Geotourism has also been summarised as restorative and reconstructive forms of tourism that enhance a destination's natural and cultural distinctiveness, as well as provide a high-quality visitor experience.

(The Geotourism Study: Phase 1 Executive Summary, conducted by the Travel Industry Association of America and sponsored by National Geographic Traveler.)

Geotourism is obviously closely related to sustainable tourism, even though it has its own refined concerns and focus.

Ecologically sustainable development

“Using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends, are maintained and the total quality of life, now and in the future, can be increased.”
(Ecologically Sustainable Development Working Groups 1991.)

Conservation

“The management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.”
(National Conservation Strategy for Australia.)

“The protection, presentation, maintenance, management, sustainable use and restoration of the natural environment (and its ecosystems).”
(Queensland Ecotourism Plan 1997.)

The issue of management is vital in relation to tourism. The environmental impacts of tourism as a service industry must be recognised and never dismissed, but they also need to be placed in perspective. Ecological sustainability will never be achieved through a focus on environment and biodiversity alone. Social and economic values and needs must become integral concerns of nature conservation management. Likewise the tourism industry must address the concerns of natural area managers and recognise them as important partners in delivering sustainable experiences to visitors.

Managed protected areas and other conservation sites now provide accessible means by which all visitors can experience at first hand nature in its wider diversity (and come to appreciate its values). Effectively planned and managed, this can foster conservation benefits – the basic challenge is to deliver good management, planning, education and resourcing.



Interpretation (directed at visitors)

1. “A special process of stimulating and encouraging an appreciation of the natural and cultural heritage of a region, as well as a means of communicating nature conservation ideals and practices.”
(*Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service.*)

2. “A means of communicating ideas and feelings which helps people enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world, and their role within it.”
(*Interpretation Australia Association.*)

The first definition sees interpretation from a visitor’s perspective as a means of value-adding to their experience because of the added interest it creates when more is known about an attraction or experience.

The second definition places the responsibility back with the visitor to arrive at their own understanding based on their collective experiences.

3. “An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, first hand experience and illustrative media, rather than simply by communicating factual information.”
(*Nature Based Tourism Strategy for Western Australia.*)

Principles for successful interpretation

Successful interpretation typically reflects a number of key principles:

- People learn better when they are actively involved in the learning process.
- People learn better when they are using as many senses as appropriate. It is generally recognised that people retain approximately 10% of what they hear, 30% of what they read, 50% of what they see and 90% of what they do.
- Insights that people discover for themselves are the most memorable as they stimulate a sense of excitement and growth. Learning requires activity on the part of the learner.
- Being aware of the usefulness of the knowledge being acquired makes the learning process more effective.

(*‘Ecotourism: Impacts, potentials and possibilities’, Wearing, S. and Neil J., 2000.*)

Enhancing the quality of interpretation at visitor centres, attractions, on tours, along trails/drives and ‘in the field’ or on site, is a major opportunity area for ‘nature in tourism’ in New South Wales.

As far as possible, interpretation needs to capture a visitor’s imagination, intellect or emotions (even momentarily) and in so doing grab their interest. Differences such as age, and cultural background are also obvious considerations.

When pursuing excellence in interpretation, there are as many paths of possibility open to visitor managers as there are creative ideas in the world. To fail to explore these is to risk having an audience label the interpretive approach adopted as too dull, tired, serious, patronising, over-complicated, overwhelming, superficial, cautious, etc.

Great creative ideas resulting in exciting interpretation outcomes are often achieved more successfully if more innovative creative development processes (e.g. those developed by Edward De Bono) are applied, and the creative net cast more widely.

Building wider creative alliances by involving other people with different ‘skill sets’ (e.g. who are known for their innovative & ‘wildcard’ thinking capacities as well as essential sense of humour & fun) can often prove of value - particularly if they are properly rewarded for the business significance of their personal contribution to the results. A capacity for simple but effective delivery coupled with good commonsense and *empathy* also helps.

Summarising its benefits, interpretation is an effective way of adding value to the experience, employing more locals, creating a cultural connection for visitors, building understanding and differentiating an operator’s product in the market.