

# National Parks, Tourism and Marketing

by Stephen Wearing

Mutawintji National Park  
Photographer: Hamilton Lund

**T**his article explores the relationship between national parks, tourism, marketing and promotion, both conceptually and practically. It examines the structure and nature of the relationship between these areas.

The implications of tourism, and particularly ecotourism's worldwide growth, have been significant for national parks, particularly in Australia, where national parks are a crucial asset for building a sustainable tourism industry. Australia has an image among international markets as a clean, green destination and some of our most important tourism icons (such as Uluru and the Great Barrier Reef) are within national parks. In fact, almost half of all international tourists to Australia currently

visit a national park during their trip (more if the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park is included). If the tourism industry is to meet its future potential, then it is essential that these important attractions are funded adequately, provide quality visitor experiences and are promoted appropriately.

Marketing has brought to national park management an 'alternative' paradigm, which has made possible an increase in the breadth and depth of understanding as to how national parks need to shift their management approaches in the era of neo-liberalist economies. Specific approaches such as marketing can increase the 'view' and identify new issues for park management. Issues such as how national parks fit into

the broader spectrum of society and how they engage with tourism which has centralised national parks as a part of its product, are now being considered. Fundamental to understanding and evaluating the connection between national parks and tourism, is the issue of supply versus demand driven marketing and promotion.

## Marketing sustainability

An increasingly primary focus among Australian park management agencies has been on delivering quality services to the public (Archer and Wearing 2002). This service delivery role typically includes, but is not restricted to, the protection of natural and cultural values, provision of quality recreation and tourism opportunities, interpretation and educational services, weed and feral animal eradication, and fire management. Consequently, pivotal to understanding the marketing relationship for national parks and tourism are the implications for protected areas, conservation and local communities. The marketing of national parks and tourism has been surrounded by much confusion and controversy, as on one hand, it attempts to take into account the dual objectives of protected areas and local communities and on the other hand, those of the tourism industry.

The marketing of tourism products is generally still associated by many people with a commercial enterprise selling the maximum level of product for short-term profit.

However, in recent years, social marketing and ecological marketing



Minnamurra NP  
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have been acknowledged as important elements of a more holistic marketing perspective. These perspectives significantly challenge the somewhat archaic belief that all marketing must be demand led (Middleton 1998) relevance to its practical implementation and its working context—the tourism industry. What then is this thing called the 'tourism industry' and what are its characteristics? Stear et al (1998: 1) provide us with an initial definition: '[a] collection of all collaborating firms and organizations which perform specific activities directed at satisfying leisure, pleasure and recreational needs.' An industry can be considered a group of sellers of close substitute outputs who supply to a common group of buyers. The tourism industry does not produce close substitute products, as does the manufacturing industry, but it comprises sectors, each of which produces closely substitutable products. Tourism industry sectors include accommodation, attractions, carrier, coordination, promotion and distribution, tour operators and wholesalers and miscellaneous groups (Stear et al 1988).

Conceptualising the relationship between national parks and protected areas and tourism as an amalgam of products incorporating a particular 'style' of tourism allows its relationship with the tourism industry to be understood (Jenkins and McArthur 1996). In this way the relationship can be seen not within the confines of one industry per se, but to draw from ideas in a range of sectors that may assist in developing this relationship.

Marketing is generally based on the 'four Ps' of product, place, price and promotion, with the emphasis on attracting, maintaining and expanding a customer base. Theoretically, markets are places where buyers and sellers meet to engage in exchange. In the process of exchange, prices are determined and quantities produced, and this process hinges on the amount of demand for a particular product. Economists generally view demand as the desire and ability to consume certain quantities of goods at various prices over a certain period of time. The law of demand states that the quantity of a good or service is negatively related to its price. In other words, if everything is held constant, consumers will purchase more of a good or service at a lower price than at a higher price. Tourism is no different in this respect. Tourism marketing is demand led, that is to say, if there is a demand for a certain product or service by consumers,

it will be supplied and marketed by profit-maximising organisations. This demand orientation determines that the 'requirements of the tourists are given highest priority and the destination area seeks to provide services to meet those requirements' (Ashworth and Goodall 1990: 227).

In the last few years, 'national parks' have become a marketing buzzword and have been used to sell any number of products, commonly using the 'eco' tag with no real indication of the quality of the product on offer. National parks have become synonymous with 'ecotourism'. There has been a substantial increase in the quantity of products in this vein. A multitude of references abound to the experiences to be found in national parks such as 'ecotour', 'ecosafari', and 'ecotravel'. One reason for the increasing proliferation of the national park label is the general lack of understanding as to what national parks represent. Some of the products being marketed are totally unrelated to national parks operating and legal boundaries, yet it is this label which is being used to sell them.

Wearing, Archer & Beeton (2007) identified numerous aspects of the tourism industry's development in relation to national parks and protected areas that needed careful consideration in ensuring sound marketing and sustainable resource management that shaped expectations appropriately. These can be summarised as follows:

- ❖ The marketing and promotion of national parks and protected areas requires sensitively developed tourist infrastructure in or adjacent to these areas. The tourism industry, therefore, must accept integrated

planning and regulation. To date, tourism development has occurred incidentally to the urban, rural and foreshore development, as in many countries there is no specific tourism zoning. Economic development demands increasingly stringent environmental assessment techniques and articles to be included in applications for development, especially in countries where economic imperatives may take precedence over more qualitative aspects such as environmental, social and cultural significance of development.

- ❖ The very philosophy of successful market segments such as ecotourism calls on low volume tourism with high ticket prices per head. This tactic also negates the business philosophy of competitive pricing to win new customers, either from the latent market or from competitors. The first requirement then is a supply led approach in the tourism industry. Given the likely problematic of this for the existing approaches of the tourism industry, an independent coordinating authority to make decisions about the number of operators, operating licences, ceiling numbers for tours, price structures would seem a likely option. The body responsible for making these decisions and policing industry activities needs to be a third party to the tourism industry. However, care must be taken in appointing a government department or commission to adopt such a role, as even the government is not impartial to its interests in tourism growth because of the short term revenue that more tourism can create for a

**Table 1**

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|----------------------|---|
| <b>Responsible</b>   | Sustainable marketing of protected areas should be designed and undertaken in a <b>responsible</b> and ethical manner.  |
| <b>Realistic</b>     | To be sustainable, marketing of protected areas should be done so in a manner that disseminates <b>realistic</b> images and information to existing and potential visitors. |
| <b>Regional</b>      | Sustainable marketing of protected areas should be designed and used in a <b>regional</b> context.  |
| <b>Research</b>      | <b>Research</b> is a fundamental building block of sustainable marketing and should be carried out and integrated into marketing planning and strategies.                   |
| <b>Relationships</b> | Cooperative <b>relationships</b> between relevant land management, industry and community stakeholders can benefit all.   |



region, state or country, especially where foreign currency is concerned.

- ❖ The marketing and promotion of national parks and protected areas requires the establishment of carrying capacities and strict monitoring of these capacities. It is a task that no profit motivated organisation in the industry sees as its responsibility. The establishment of carrying capacities requires a comprehensive knowledge and expertise in the field of environmental, social and cultural assessment. The latter two are very difficult to measure but a commendable starting point is with the host community, by identifying in partnership with each community, what is of social and cultural importance. This task in itself requires a great deal of time to be invested in living with and learning from the community in order to establish these social and cultural carrying capacities. Monitoring is an essential component of carrying capacity management. It requires ongoing financial and human resource commitment to monitor and evaluate impacts and changing relationships.

- ❖ The marketing and promotion of national parks and protected areas relies on the environmentally sensitive behaviour and operations of tour operators and tourists, but the proponents of ecotourism may have placed undue faith in the notion that the behaviour of tourists, developers and other industry operators can be modified through education and awareness programmes (Butler 1990; Pigram 1989). In recent years there has been a flood of 'codes of ethics', of 'charters' released by a variety of tourism industry groups and environmental organisations ranging from conservation groups (World Wide Fund for Nature, Australian Conservation Foundation) to industry groups (Australia Tourism Industry Association [ATIA]; Pacific Asia Travel Association [PATA]). The benefits of raising awareness in this fashion have been tentatively acknowledged (Jarviluoma 1992), but it remains to be seen whether this results in modified behaviour.

Marketing has brought a significant paradigm change to the thinking of protected area agencies in Australia. It has often been seen in the past as simply a means to sell a product to a mass market, and therefore, had negative connotations. From this discussion it is clear that through



4WD, Murramarang NP  
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appropriate and stringent strategies, an agency can market a 'destination' in a way that complies with organisational goals and objectives and upholds the ideals of ecotourism. It is our belief that through manipulation of the essential marketing mix factors, target markets, positioning statements and company objectives, marketing can be utilised as a tool for directing the future development of ecotourism within the boundaries of sustainable development.

Effective promotion and communication strategies are one of the industry's best opportunities to shape consumer demand and expectations, so that they are reconciled with the product offered. Ideally, ecotourism provides a symbiotic relationship with marketing of protected areas as it is a small-scale, low-key tourism, so as to minimise the impacts that may occur on destination environments. Methods of achieving this may mean imposing ceiling numbers, which in turn suggests economically that prices charged per person will be somewhat higher than 'mainstream tourism', where economies of scale and competition help determine pricing structures within and between organisations operating within one destination.

These objectives, however, are unlikely to be reached in light of the current nature and characteristics of the tourism industry in its approach to destination marketing where 'more is better' so that to remain low-key and small-scale is problematic, and it is difficult to guarantee even if it starts at this point once the tourism industry perceives a new product development opportunity and starts to

market that opportunity (Boele 1993).

Mechanisms that overcome this such as restrictions associated with sustainable development and ecotourism have included both qualitative and quantitative measures, including charging higher prices for access to tourist destinations and attractions might prove useful. Indeed, restricting supply would automatically increase the price of tourism products, thereby reducing the opportunities for some prospective tourists. Therefore it is important to ensure that the operationalisation of tourism in national parks is done within a defined context.

Guiding principles for marketing national parks

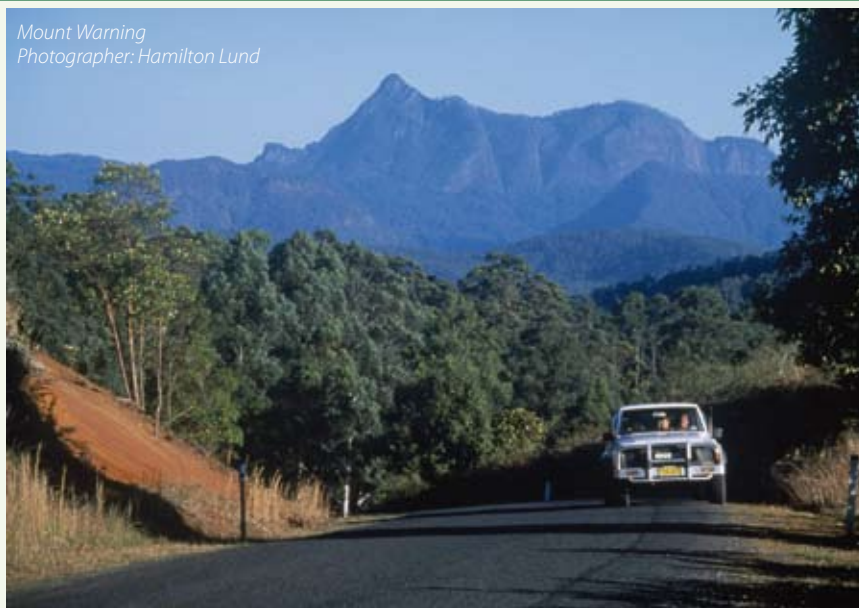
We suggest five guiding principles for the sustainable marketing (this refers to the ensuring of limitations in use based on the supply of the resource rather than demand for it) of national parks and other protected areas. The guiding principles were developed from relevant literature.

**The five guiding principles are listed in Table 1.**

The conceptual model attempts to provide a framework that can assist in developing a way forward for partnerships between park management agencies and the tourism industry for the marketing of protected areas using the five guiding principles as a means to check how it might be achieved in balance.

The recommendations that follow are organised according to the five guiding principles described in the article. In addition, the recommendations address the types of issues identified in the article and fit within the various approaches to marketing which are available to protected area managers and the tourism

Mount Warning  
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industry. When combined, the good practice examples and recommendations serve to illustrate various ways forward in achieving the goal of sustainable marketing and promotion of visitation to protected areas.

**Recommendation 1:** *At all times the marketing and promotion of visitation to national parks and other protected areas should be based on a well informed strategic and planned approach to sustainable visitation so that when it is considering the role of marketing it can then be done in a responsible and ethical manner.*

This can be achieved by recognising that:

- ❖ Conservation messages should guide the marketing and promotional strategies and activities of protected area agencies and all other relevant stakeholders.
- ❖ Messages highlighting the threats to environmental integrity caused by visitor use should be delivered to target markets to either reinforce responsible or modify irresponsible visitor behaviour. Such promotional and communication campaigns can be delivered on-site to current and potential target markets, and information should be readily accessible.
- ❖ The development of voluntary codes of practice for park agencies, nature tourism operators and marketing bodies should be pursued.
- ❖ Marketing and destination promotion activities should target identified appropriate markets only, rather than the generic mass market.
- ❖ In situations of excess demand, lack of supply, or conflicting use, demarketing strategies are

appropriate in order to discourage the level of demand for a particular setting or activity.

- ❖ Ensure that the content of marketing campaigns are comprehensive, balanced and accurate so that the appropriate messages are conveyed.
- ❖ Ensure that support mechanisms and resources are committed to sustaining the marketing campaign for its design life.

**Recommendation 2:** *It is important that visitor expectations are realistic, as this contributes to visitor satisfaction.*

From a conservation agency's perspective, marketing and promotion can be used as a proactive tool for visitor management and a way to get conservation messages out to a wider audience. From the tourism industry's perspective marketing and promotion is used to sell their product and build their business. For both, it is important that visitor expectations are realistic, as this contributes to visitor satisfaction. Recommendations for making marketing and promotion more realistic include:

- ❖ The prior expectations of first time visitors to a protected area setting need to be carefully shaped to ensure that on-site experiences meet or exceed expectations and satisfaction levels are maximised. Promise less, deliver more!
- ❖ If there is a mismatch between a destination's image and the actual destination, then potential for unsatisfactory visitor experiences is increased. This can lead to negative word-of-mouth and fewer repeat visitors.

- ❖ Fundamentally, any information or images disseminated must be truthful. Park agencies should recognise the diversity of values and opinions that exist within and between communities and provide marketing material that is appropriate based on the variety of market segments that are users and potential users of parks

**Recommendation 3:** *Sustainable marketing of natural protected areas should be designed and used in a regional context that takes account of the spectrum of different setting and experience types on both public and private land tenures.*

This might entail:

- ❖ The location of 'icon' settings being defined within selected regions and targeted promotion campaigns can then focus on these settings.
- ❖ Settings that provide for more low-key and remote experiences can be promoted to alternative and more appropriate target markets such as for example independent bushwalkers, adventurers and small group eco-tourists.
- ❖ 'Packaging' of tourism products that provides better access for visitors, opportunities for regional areas to showcase their less-known attractions and extend the length of stay of visitors in their region, and opportunities for tourism operators to position new products in the marketplace.
- ❖ Encouraging visitation across a region in a manner consistent with park and destination management objectives and intent.

**Recommendation 4:** *Market research is a fundamental building block for the sustainable marketing of natural protected areas and should be carried out and integrated into marketing strategies and planning initiatives.*

It is imperative that:

- ❖ Sustainable marketing be built upon an understanding of the values, needs, characteristics, and behaviour of target markets.
- ❖ The size of target markets and the likely costs and benefits of addressing market segments be carefully evaluated.
- ❖ Market research allows for the understanding of various influences on visitor demand and be undertaken on a systematic, ongoing basis.
- ❖ Research be undertaken that provides a systematic basis for policy and

planning where the information content in marketing should be matched to market segments and this should direct the on-site interpretive programs provided in order to provide a comprehensive, balanced and accurate experience that is satisfying for the visitor.

- ❖ Research be conducted to ensure that the agency is able to develop a comprehensive policy concerning marketing and is able to link this systematically to management strategies and particularly interpretive strategies.
- ❖ Every effort be made by parks agencies, tour operators and tour managers to better understand their key target markets needs, interests and preferred media/communication channels.
- ❖ Marketing campaigns are monitored and feedback from visitors and non visitors is provided through research.
- ❖ Performance criteria are developed to measure the effectiveness of campaigns and programs are these are evaluated and reviewed within appropriate timeframes.
- ❖ Development and testing of marketing programs (social and demarketing) be undertaken in a case study approach to assess their value and provide guidelines on their implementation.

**Recommendation 5:** *Sustainable marketing of natural protected areas should recognise that cooperative marketing strategies and campaigns between protected area agencies, tourism operators, state, regional and local tourism organisations, and community representatives can benefit natural resources as well as society.*

While it is necessary for park management agencies to develop and implement their own marketing services and programs, they may benefit greatly by utilising the expertise of the private sector in marketing national parks. Parks Victoria provides a very good example of an Australian park management agency which has increasingly utilised external marketing organisations to assist in developing marketing programs and strategies.

For providers of outdoor recreation opportunities, whether public or private, although understanding the needs, behaviour and characteristics of their customers will continue to be an important element of their marketing strategies, finding a balance between attracting more customers and ensuring

the long term protection of the natural resources upon which much outdoor recreation is based will continue to challenge them. There are opportunities for cooperative alliances to be formed between protected area agencies, local community and indigenous groups, private operators and other NGO's so that sustainable and effective approaches to marketing a range of outdoor-based products to identified target markets are created. This can ensure that all stakeholders are working towards the sustainable management of natural resources and recreational opportunities with the goal of broad-based benefits for all.

A cooperative approach to marketing is likely to provide businesses with access to new or more varied sources of potential customers. For example, attractions in relative proximity to each other or of a similar nature commonly attract more visitors through joint promotion. The provision of packages incorporating the total holiday experience is facilitated by cooperation among suppliers involved. Cooperative marketing also spreads the cost among a number of organisations, and allows them to participate in more ambitious campaigns (CRC 2001).

Sustainable marketing of natural protected areas therefore should recognise that cooperative marketing strategies and campaigns between protected area agencies, tourism operators, state, regional and local tourism organisations, and community representatives can benefit natural resources as well as society. This can be achieved by acknowledging that:

- ❖ Protected area agencies need to establish and strengthen their relationships with key stakeholders to ensure the realistic promotion and delivery of quality park experiences, and the communication of responsible visitor behaviour to a range of appropriate target markets.
- ❖ Since protected area agencies are usually constrained by limited resources, strategic collaborative partnerships can provide a cost-effective means of implementing sustainable marketing strategies.
- ❖ Marketing of national parks, whether initiated by the management agency, tourism operators or tourism organisations, should seek to build strong, mutually beneficial relationships with the broader public, with emphasis given to trust and social responsibility.

- ❖ Tourism organisations and park agencies need to pursue joint research agendas to ensure adequate directions for marketing campaigns and to ensure commonality in research agendas.

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