# Marketing National Parks for Sustainable Tourism: Bridging the Conservation Human Usage Divide through Track/ Trail Based Interpretation

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## Introduction

For at least the last 150 years there has been recognition that the value one ascribes to nature is socially constructed. The early history of the national parks movement in the United States was predicated on notions of the wilderness frontier and evolving urban sentiments over the restorative value of rural zones (Runte, 1997). In Australia, tourism industries became a focus of the early national parks movement specifically because many national park sites were deemed to be created on worthless land, which had limited botanical or other value (C. Hall & Frost, 2009). Utilitarian philosophies amongst the early national park managers have led to the development of profitable nature based tourism industries in many of the world's iconic national parks (Ma, Ryan, & Bao, 2009, p. 21).

Removing such industries from protected areas on environmental preservation grounds is often not practical as tourism provides one 'raison d'être' for the existence of national parks; justifying 'in economic terms the retention of relatively undisturbed natural areas' (Armstrong & Kern, 2011, p. 22). Instead ways must be found to allow tourism to be marketed and developed in a manner that is considerate of the unique environment in which it operates. The early years of national parks in the United States were characterised by conflict between the utilitarian conservationist doctrines of Gifford Pinchot on the one hand and the aesthetic preservationists represented by John Muir on the other (Sharpe, Odegaard, & Sharpe, 1994). Stankey (1989) notes that it was possible to manage such conflicts in the early years due to the relatively small number of visitors to parks.

In recent years however the number of visitors to the world's iconic parks has grown considerably. Between 1873 and 1877, 500 people visited Yellowstone National Park (Sharpe, Odegaard et al. 1994). In 2010 3.64 million people visited Yellowstone National Park, spending $334 million dollars in surrounding communities and supported 4,900 local jobs (Travel Montana, 2012).

The aim of this paper is to present some initial thoughts on the sustainable marketing opportunities that tracks and trails may provide for park managers. Wearing (2008) has identified that a sustainable national park marketing strategy should present realistic images and information to existing and potential visitors. Perhaps more than any other piece of park infrastructure, tracks and trails provide opportunities for 'presenting recreational opportunities to visitors along aesthetically pleasing routes [whilst simultaneously] … shielding other valued and sensitive ecosystems' (Dragovich & Bajpai, 2012, p. B 114). There is a need, however, for tracks and trails to provide something more than a service to the visiting public. Wearing (2008) has identified that national park marketers must look beyond a sole focus on demand led profit generation and embrace a model of national park marketing that encapsulates principles of: stakeholder responsibility; realism of message; respect for regional context; stakeholder relationships; and research. For this to be achieved, we argue that tracks and trails must be packaged with onsite and offsite interpretation to encapsulate both passive and active experiences. Drawing on the experience economy literature of Pine and Gilmore (1998) and a range of Australian and international national park examples we will consider how culturally and environmentally appropriate track/ trail interpretation can assist with the development of a place specific marketing strategy that fulfils the needs of tourists whilst recognising the importance of national parks to Australia's national identity.

## Tracks and Trails as Sites of Ephemeral Experiences in National Parks

Robert Bednar, writing in the work Observation Points the Visual Poetics of National Parks notes that 'trails in national parks are not simply the means for experiencing the national parks, but the medium through which the national parks present themselves as natural landscapes' (Bednar, 2012, p. 3). More than any other piece of national parks infrastructure, tracks and trails represent an opportunity for human engagement with nature. Iconic tracks, such as the Overland Track, in the Cradle Mountain National Park in western Tasmania provide the back drop for "360 degree views of Cradle Mountain … Just trees and peaks, rocks and glacial valleys, and shining tarns under a blue sky" (Sharpe et al., 1994). Similarly in the United States and Canada, the Chilkoot Trail offers visitors the chance to walk in the footsteps of 'stampeders' who once participated in the Klondike Gold Rushes.

Ephemeral experiences on the Overland Track and other iconic tracks and trails are only possible if tourism marketers appreciate that the national park visitor must be actively

involved in the creation of experiences in a natural setting (Eagles & McCool, 2002). Ord (2013) notes that since a team from the Tasmanian Government's Tourist Bureau first trekked the Overland Track in the 1930s there has been over 8000 overlanders who have completed the walk. Gone are the days, however, of 'blundering through some of nature's wildest terrain, an environment infested with leeches … all the while battling Tasmania's notoriously unpredictable weather' (Ord, 2013, p. 20). Today trekkers 'sit inside cosy huts, sipping red wine by firelight, warm and snug after their hot showers, barely sore from the day's tramp having lugged only backpacks' (Ord, 2013, p. 20). The close relationship between trails and visitor experiences has been recognised since the United States National Parks Service instigated the National Trails System Act in 1968. Under this act a national system of recreation, scenic and historic trails were instigated, in part, 'to provide for the ever-increasing outdoor recreation needs of an expanding population' (National Parks Service, 2012b).

Chase (1986 in Rettie, Clevenger, & Ford, 2009, p. 411) has stated that the presence of human beings (including tourists) does not, in itself, make areas less natural; 'the world of nature and culture overlap'. National Park managers must find ways of working with the tourism sector to market experiences that are compatible with the conservation organisation's strategic objectives. Recent attempts to synthesise the relationship between parks and tourism include the association of the National Parks Cooperative with the US Travel Association, which has allowed the travel sector to strategically position their brand alongside the National Park's movement. Fundamental to the success of any such marketing initiative is recognition of the multidimensionality of the wilderness tourist experiences.

Markwell (2004, p. 19) has established that 'our collective understanding of nature is produced by social and cultural processes and practices involving the interventions of all kinds of produces'. Research investigating the complexities of the wilderness experience supports the notion that tourists view the environment in a variety of ways (Dawson, Newman, & Watson, 1998; Glaspell, Watson, Kneeshaw, & Pendergrast, 2003; T. Hall & Cole, 2012). Hall and Cole (2012) identify that components of experience include both active and passive engagement with nature, opportunities for solitude and opportunities for social interaction. Because experience can be both active and passive one may draw a connection here to an idea from Wattchow and Brown (2011, p. xxi) that a protected area visitor's conceptualisation of 'place is influenced by both the imaginative and physical reality of a location and its people'. The juxtaposition of imagined and physical reality can be illustrated with respect to the Sagamartha National Park in Nepal. Wearing, van der Duim and Schweinsberg (2007) note that the imagined reality of visitors to Sagamartha is often to experience and conquer the visual grandeur of the Himalayas, walking in the footsteps of colonial pioneers including Sir Edmund Hillary and George Mallory. Trail infrastructure including the Edmund Hilary Route provides the physical support to make these dreams possible.

Over the last three or so decades there has been an expanding body of academic research, which has

considered indicator based frameworks for visitor management in national parks (Diamantis, 2011; Monz, Cole, Leung, & Marion, 2010; George H Stankey, Cole, Lucas, Petersen, & Frissell, 1985). By pursuing zone based approaches to visitor management, park agencies have increasingly been forced to formalise trail offerings within national parks (see Department of Environment and Primary Industries, 2013). Dragovich and Bajpai (2012) have identified that the presence of well-maintained tracks reduces a visitor's need to create informal tracks of their own. The impact of this is a potential reduction in the need for informal trails that could have the effect of threatening both ecological integrity and the visitor experience (see Leung, Newburger, Jones, Kuhn, & Woiderski, 2011). In national parks the world over including Sagamartha Nepal, Yosemite USA or the Haolong Bay World Heritage area in Northern Vietnam, there is increasing concern over the issues of carrying capacity and the impacts of uncoordinated tourism development on national parks. Beeton (2006) has identified potential carrying capacity issues on trails as multiple trail user groups compete for a desired engagement with nature. In the Yosemite National Park 82% of, mid-summer, river wilderness users have reported feeling some degree of overcrowding during a visit (Whittaker, Shelby, Meldrum, DeGroot, & Bacon, 2012).

Dorwart, Moore and Leung (2009, p. 33) have identified five perceptual themes in visitor experience on the Appalachian Trail: 'nature oriented details; scenic value; management influences; presence of other people and depreciative behaviour'. State and national tourism agencies cannot afford to ignore these components of experience. Within the Australian context the push to align national marketing endeavours towards nature conscious experience seekers has created a unique opportunity to capitalise on the nation's nineteen World Heritage Areas and other national parks through marketing campaigns such as the National Landscapes Program. For such campaigns to be successful, however, there is a necessity to integrate marketing efforts within the strategic management apparatus of protected areas (Gilmore & Simmons, 2007). The final section will comment on how this may be achieved through the strategic use of interpretation.

## The Four Realms of Experience – Track Trail Relationship Marketing and Interpretation as a Pathway to Sustainable Tourism

Since Pine and Gilmore (1998) first introduced the notion of an experience economy there have been a number of academics who have sought to link this theoretical construct to tourism and other leisure industries (Morgan, Elbe, & de Esteban Curiel, 2009; Oh, Fiore, & Jeoung, 2007; Quan & Wang, 2004). In 2007, Hayes and MacLeod employed the central tenants of Pine and Gilmore's model in a content analysis of trail brochures and leaflets, asking whether urban heritage trails are marketed as products or experiences (Hayes & MacLeod, 2007). Pine and Gilmore (1998) establish that experiences fall into four broad categories: entertainment, education, esthetic and escapist. Reconciliation of opportunities for entertainment and escapism is, we would argue, the cause of many of the sustainability challenges surrounding the development of

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unregulated adventure tourism in iconic pedestrian trails in national parks such as Sagamartha, Nepal. To address this, it is our belief that rather than simply providing entertainment and/ or escapist opportunities for visitors, park managers must also incorporate active and passive interpretive educational opportunities directly into entertainment and escapist activities. We do not dispute that park visitors must always derive benefits from parks. Research by Crilley, Webber and Taplin (2012) has already identified for the Kakadu World Heritage Area, the link between user benefits and their overall positive response to the park, which itself presumably has flow on effects on word of mouth marketing. The challenge becomes how we can use interpretation to simultaneously 'raise awareness levels in relation to the uniqueness and fragility of National Park areas and promote and encourage local community awareness, ownership and affinity with their National Park area' (Gilmore & Simmons, 2007, p. 195).

Archer and Wearing (2001) have identified that historically there has been a tension between interpretation and marketing, stemming from a predisposition amongst many park managers to recognise synergies and the potential of marketing to aid conservation outcomes. The western model of national parks, to which Australia is a signatory, has its primary foundation in the notion of nature as wilderness. The gazettal of land as national parks signifies the enlightened withdrawal (Hogenauer, 2001) of land from private use and the handover of this land to the public for enjoyment by both current and future generations (Adams, 2009). While the juxtaposition of private and public interests has often made it difficult for traditional marketing principles of product exchange between producers and consumers to gain traction in many national park settings; national parks will always be a range of products in one: wilderness, nature, recreation, commercialisation etc. (Hogenauer, 2001). Because many of the benefits of parks have no tangible commercial value, Wearing (2008) and Borrie et al (2002) have proposed the notion of relationship marketing where managers will look to cultivate links to the general public with the aim of convincing stakeholders of their ability to use and safeguard land for future generations. Interpretation provides the mechanism whereby this may be achieved.

Freedman Tilden defined interpretation as 'an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects by firsthand experience and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information' (Tilden, 1977, pp. 8-9). The United States National Park Service have since refined this definition to the process of helping each park visitor find an opportunity to personally connect with a place (National Parks Service, 2012a). Implicit in this remit is the notion that interpretation strategies must be aligned to visitor research to ensure the appropriate targeting of messages (see Brecon Beacons National Park, ND for United Kingdom example). At the time of writing much of Australian tourism's marketing endeavours are focused on the cultivation of the experience seeker. Experience seekers are identified as being media and marketing savvy (Tourism Australia, 2012). Thus we would

see experience seekers as an appropriate target market for moves to embrace off site GPS and internet based marketing/ interpretation strategies.

At the time of writing a number of protected area jurisdictions are pursuing new approaches to park planning using innovative software platforms. In the United States, the development of the Nature Valley Trail View has provided trail users, as well as the broader public the opportunity to experience a street view perspective of the Grand Canyon, Great Smokey Mountains, Sequoia and Yellowstone National Parks. The technology is modelled off Google Street view and the online interface for visitors provides not only visual access to hundreds of kilometres of national park trails, which serves as a form of pre visit marketing, but also provides up to date information on Nature Valley conservation works (see http://www.naturevalleytrailview.com). In Australia, Parks Victoria have taken the notion of visitor interaction one step further, employing Public Participation Global Information System technology in the management of the Greater Alpine Region. Brown and Weber (2011) describe the benefits of the technology, where visitors log their experiences, perceptions, environmental impacts and facility needs on an online portal. Brown and Weber (2011, NP) note that such strategies democratise the national park management process and 'help build and sustain trust in a park agency's planning processes and decisions'.

## Conclusion

Parks Australia's Sustainable Tourism Overview 2011 – 2016 identifies the need for 'visitor information and interpretation [to be] delivered to promote understanding and appreciation of the natural and cultural values of reserves, and the need for their protection' (Department of Sustainability Environment Water Population and Communities, 2013). As conduits for tourists to enter and pursue experiences within parks, tracks and trails represent one of the primary localities for the delivery of interpretive messages. Interpretive messages must, however, be delivered in a manner that compliments visitor marketing messages if parks are to serve as a resource for the development of sustainable nature based tourism. TTF Australia (2013) has estimated that nature based tourism is worth $23 billion per year to the Australian economy, contributing to the development of a national reputation as a 'clean, green tourism destination'. Drawing on Pine and Gilmore's (1998) conceptualization of experience in the experience economy, as well as examples of pre-visit and post-visit online interpretation mechanisms, the authors have suggested how interpretation may assist with developing desired experiences within the nature sector, whilst also assisting to preserve the conservation ideals of the parks movement.

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