

STATUS REPORT - BARNA MIA VIEWING ENCLOSURE

Introduction

The Barna Mia Viewing Enclosure at Dryandra Woodland was officially opened on 14 December 2002 with public tours commencing from that time. The operation of Barna Mia has been guided by the Draft Business and Marketing Plan 2001-2011 (copy attached). The plan determined that the mission statement for Barna Mia is:

To manage nature-based tourism at Dryandra as a profitable enterprise while providing a unique, high quality and enriching wildlife tourism experience within a viewing enclosure without compromising the values of the wildlife.

Eight key operational goals are identified in the plan with associated objectives and performance indicators.

Barna Mia Operations in 2002 and 2003 - Performance Review

Goal 1: The five mammal species on display do not demonstrate any serious adverse effects from tours over time.

A total of 21 animals (excluding pouch young) have been introduced into the enclosure. Six bilbies (comprised of a breeding pair, 2 of their joeys and 2 x 80 mm pouch young), 5 boodies (2 X M, 3 x F), and 4 western barred bandicoots (1 x M, 3 x F) were released on 24 October 2002. An additional female bilby (with 2 x 70 mm pouch young) was released on 10 December 2002. Four rufous hare-wallabies or mala (2 x M, 2 x F), and 1 banded hare-wallaby were released on 13 November 2002. The hare-wallabies were radio tracked on a regular basis to monitor their wellbeing for two months following relocation to Barna Mia. In addition to the pouch young introduced with their mothers to the enclosure, the bilbies have produced a further three offspring and the boodies another one. A female western barred bandicoot currently has two pouch young. All juveniles and pouch young in Barna Mia have survived.

Processed herbivore and omnivore pellets, supplemented with fresh food, are provided for the different species. Feed is offered under shelters and bushes to minimise the possibility of predation. Quantities supplied have been monitored to determine appropriate amounts. Animals are regularly provided with food every second night. However, more frequent feeding also occurs, according to the number of tours held weekly. Feed quantities are adjusted accordingly.

Regular monitoring is undertaken. This consists of visual monitoring by guides during feeding and tours as well as trapping programs. The frequency of trapping is largely determined by the sexual maturation of juveniles (which are relocated to the breeding enclosure). Eight trapping sessions have been conducted between October 2002 and May 2003. The frequency of trapping has been higher in the initial stages of the project and is expected to average 6 to 8 programs per year. The health and condition of the animals has been excellent with all animals gaining weight. As sub-adults become independent and reach sexual maturity, they are relocated to the main breeding enclosure to minimise contact with people and prevent breeding with related individuals.

The animals have shown no adverse response to visitors or to the red lights used during tours. Interactions between visitors to Barna Mia and the animals are closely monitored by guides.

Goal 2: Visitors have a wildlife tourism experience that is memorable.

The way the animals have adapted and interact with people has been the most pleasing and surprising aspect of the project to date. The nightly behaviour of the animals varies according to a wide range of factors. However, boodies, bilbies and mala are regularly seen on tours. Several of the animals will approach tour participants and most of them are comfortable feeding at designated stations, providing clear viewing for visitors and an opportunity for quality observation and interpretation of several species. The successful habituation of the animals to feeding routines and familiarisation with people is a major component of the success of Barna Mia.

A joint research project with Murdoch University to monitor and assess the interaction of people and animals commenced in early May 2003. To date there are no results of completed surveys to report upon. However, the verbal feedback provided by visitors to guides has been positive, with many visitors indicating their experience at Barna Mia has exceeded their expectations. Feedback provided by visitors is noted and incorporated into improving tours.

Goal 3: The viewing enclosure operation returns a profit from the first year of operation.

Based on current financial performance it is highly unlikely that this goal will be achieved within the first twelve months and possibly longer. The current price structure of \$12 per adult, \$6 per child and \$32 per family does not cover direct tour costs (guide wages and vehicles) unless two consecutive tours are run on the same night, which is uncommon. The draft business and marketing plan used an average of three hours to complete a tour and return to Narrogin. The actual tour time is closer to six hours, resulting in higher costs than projected. A proposal to increase entry fees has been submitted for consideration.

Total visitor numbers for the first five months of operation are 626 and comprised both individuals and organised groups, mainly from educational facilities. The draft business and marketing plan estimated receiving an annual 7500 persons per annum. However, the inability to obtain sufficient revenue is compromising the ability to promote and market the venture. It is expected that visitor numbers will increase as marketing efforts improve and the facility increases in popularity. Merchandise sales are also an important source of income and comprise approximately half the current gross revenue.

Goal 4: The capital investment to construct the viewing enclosure is paid off within 10 years.

Unless there are significant increases in revenue and we are able to reduce costs, it is unlikely that the capital investment will be paid off within 10 years. There has not been sufficient time since tours commenced to undertake an accurate re-analysis of the financial position. However, projections using lower annual visitor numbers would result in 20 years as the period to pay off capital investment.

Goal 5: Through promotion, Dryandra Woodland will become known as the prime nature-based destination in the wheatbelt region and as a prime wildlife tourism destination in Western Australia.

Funds from the Department's capital program and a Commonwealth grant have been used to print 10,000 flyers and 5000 A4 brochures. Copies are attached. Design work for a poster has been completed, as have for a VIP promotional folder. 900 copies of the poster are currently being printed for distribution. Flyers and brochures have been circulated to local visitor centres and tourist outlets.

Advertisements, including editorials, have been placed in two major Western Australian tourism publications which are distributed nationally and internationally - "Western Australia's Beautiful South" and Heartlands Regional Planner. Other promotional and marketing activities are being considered. For example, there are plans to bring several likely tourist operators to the centre and conduct a special tour.

The Department's capacity to complete all components of the venture has been constrained by the time and effort required to establish the animals and set up the building. For example, funds allocated to provide some special interpretation within the centre had to be deferred to next financial year because staff were committed to other establishment activities.

Goal 6: The entry building design and function is complementary to the wildlife tour but does not compete or decrease the value of observing the threatened mammals.

The building design is simple with the entry constructed to represent an animal burrow. The main material used in construction is straw bales. Internally the design of the building is simple and aims not to detract from the tour of the enclosure. To date feedback from visitors has focussed on seeing the animals but the results of the survey commenced in early May will provide additional information.

Goal 7: The building design incorporates efficient energy, water and waste management features and aims to minimise maintenance requirements.

Although efficient water and waste systems were used, the solar system proposed for the building has been deferred due to the costs of the solar system being higher than estimated.

Goal 8: Management of the viewing enclosure complies with the requirements of the Dryandra Woodland Management Plan (1995-2005).

The animal viewing facility has been designed and established to comply with the requirements of the Dryandra Woodland Management Plan.

Predicted Performance 2003/04

Barna Mia is an exciting new opportunity that provides a unique interactive wildlife experience and has created a potential eco-tourism icon in the wheatbelt region. It offers many obvious educational and promotional benefits for the Department by influencing public attitudes about wildlife conservation and providing education about the Western Shield program. Barna Mia should be seen as more than just another commercial enterprise, with its achievements measured by more than financial success. Six of the eight key goal areas will be achieved when measured against stated performance criteria.

Forward estimates for 2003/2004 indicate that net revenue from tours and merchandise will be less than direct costs, with a cash break-even point unlikely to be reached for a number of years due to current cost structures and likely revenue. This projection is based on the limited operation of Barna Mia to 31 March 2003, so actual performance in the long term may be better than break even.

Department of Conservation and Land Management
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