

Managing Public Use of Islands

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This workshop was based on the general acceptance that the public use and are attracted to islands. This use may be recreational or educational, or both. In all instances the managing agency should attempt to guide use of an island, or group of islands, so that the public gain an appreciation and understanding of the island's natural values and features.

The following discussion points were used:

1. Conservation as a primary objective;
2. The importance of interpretation;
3. Managing traditional use;
4. Social research and monitoring; and
5. The regional setting and planning in a regional context.

CONSERVATION AS A PRIMARY OBJECTIVE

The workshop agreed that conservation should be the primary objective in the management of most of our offshore islands. This objective should determine the acceptable level of public use.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERPRETATION

It was agreed that all use of islands by the public should be guided by interpretive facilities (e.g. signs) and, if possible, interpretive programs (e.g. pamphlets, guided tours). Discussions on ways of guiding public use, and informing and educating the public, occupied most of the workshop session.

The main limiting factors, in the provision of interpretive facilities and material, are staff and resources. In addition, interpretation is recognised as a skill and, therefore, staff with expertise in this area are fundamental to the success of any interpretive program. Thus, given limited resources, effort should be concentrated on more heavily used islands or more heavily used site(s) on a given island. A major problem in informing and educating island users is the nature of the user, as many are 'individuals'

seeking areas little used by the general public. One solution is placing signs at launching sites or conspicuous sites, and then reinforcing the message with signs on the islands. However, with an area like the Great Barrier Reef, with thousands of islands and hundreds of kilometres of coastline from which boats can be launched, the manager may find it difficult to anticipate where people come from and where they go.

The workshop felt that the wording on signs should be as brief as possible, and the number of signs should be kept to a minimum. It may be appropriate in some areas to have signs in several languages (e.g. Ashmore Reef).

Another solution is providing guides. In New Zealand, on Kapiti Island, the ranger (or his wife) meets the boat-loads of visitors as they arrive, and provides a 15 minute briefing on where to go, what to see and how to act. Good training for these guides is essential, and it was suggested that guides should be issued with a licence once they have successfully completed a training course. People in organised parties were recognised as being generally easier to control than 'unsupervised' individuals or groups.

Another solution is self-guided walks and unmanned interpretive facilities. In general, rangers are the preferred resource, then guides, then pamphlets, then signs, all of which were considered better than nothing at all.

Licensing was advocated as a solution to both educational and enforcement/management problems. It was suggested that when a licence for use of a particular island is issued, it is accompanied by information on the values of the island. This technique has been successfully used in both Australia and New Zealand. In Western Australia, ecological information on the value of local offshore islands has recently been added to the boat user's guidebook for the Barrow Island region. In Queensland, the tide book includes information on conservation.

Not only does licensing provide a way of informing the public, it also provides a means of managing

potential damaging forms of use, such as the construction and use of shacks. This approach has achieved some success on islands off the Western Australian coastline, with squatters occupying shacks gradually leaving once their licence or lease has expired.

All workshop members agreed that the surveillance necessary to achieve a satisfactory level of control and guidance of public use was not currently available.

MANAGING TRADITIONAL USE

The problems of managing traditional use and informing traditional users of the conservation values of an island, or group of islands, was identified by all workshop members. Although traditional use is difficult to define, it must be recognised as a valid form of public use. As such, total protection is an unrealistic goal. Management plans identifying an acceptable range and level of uses provide a solution.

Joint management and formulation of management plans is one of the best ways of informing traditional users of the conservation values of an area as well as rationalising the level of use. In Australia joint management plans have been developed for several national parks in the Northern Territory. The development of these plans has been based on the use of a planning matrix to compare conservation needs with the aspirations/perceptions of the traditional users. In this way areas of conflict can be identified and moves instigated to resolve them.

SOCIAL RESEARCH AND MONITORING

Social research is necessary to firstly, investigate the capability of a site to support various levels of use without unacceptable levels of damage to the environment, and secondly, to determine the demand for particular forms of use. Once information is available on these two aspects, the suitability of a site for a particular form of use can be determined.

The need for monitoring is now widely accepted. However, the importance of monitoring the success, or otherwise, of management practices, particularly those related to public use, deserves special emphasis. This could involve, for example, monitoring the effectiveness of interpretive facilities. Social monitoring may range from regular counts of visitor numbers to more detailed data collection to determine the impact of a particular form of recreational use.

THE REGIONAL SETTING AND PLANNING IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

Planning in a regional context (i.e. local, state, national and international) is essential if the conservation values of islands are to be protected, whilst at the same time meeting recreational demand. Planning must be based on a recognition of regional demands, as well as the suitability of parts of an island, or of an island in a group, for particular forms of public use. In this way more sensitive areas or islands can be protected by directing use to less sensitive sites.

This serves to emphasise the importance of regional planning independent of tenure. In this way, for example on multiple-use islands, private enterprise could be encouraged to absorb the majority of use, thus keeping areas of high conservation value relatively free of disturbance.

Zoning was suggested as a successful technique for optimising resource use and management. Zoning should be based on a stratification of uses and areas. The workshop agreed on the importance of zoning, although it may necessitate some sacrifice of conservation values in certain areas.

The workshop concluded that planned management of public use, particularly in regard to the optimisation of resources at the regional level, was essential for the conservation of island values. An integral part of this planning is the provision of interpretive facilities and material.