

## ECONOMIC VALUE OF BIODIVERSITY

# SO YOU WANT TO GET INVOLVED IN ECOTOURISM?

By Pat Barblett

A number of *Land for Wildlife* members have interests in nature-based and ecotourism. Their interests are described as "special interest tourism", which emphasises contact and understanding between host and guests as well as between the visitor and the environment.

Visitors are reassessing what they want. Current market trends highlight the movement away from the mass produced and standardized tourism packages, and an increased propensity to purchase experiences that involve learning about the environment and interacting with it. Consumers are better educated than ever before, have more disposable income and leisure time and are environmentally aware. Globally, with increased competition in air travel and cheaper airfares in the market place, people are more mobile. These two major factors along with a emergence of a highly competitive global tourism industry, are producing consumers with very high expectations.

Tourism and the environment are closely linked. Many *Land for Wildlife* members, as landowners, are well positioned to package an authentic tourism product. They have complete control over the product developed on their own land. However, with a limited knowledge of the tourism industry this could be a daunting task. So where does one begin?

There are two things I would advise as a starting point.

1. Get to know how the tourism industry works, and consider the characteristics and forces that help shape it. Many products are designed for the mass market and don't allow for individual needs.
2. Strategically plan your tourism product. Identify what makes your product special.

### Knowing how the Tourism Industry works

WA is divided into nine tourism regions, each with a regional tourism association (funded by the Western Australian Tourism Commission {WATC} and the industry) where decisions are made. They are responsible for marketing the region. The Tourism Council of



Australia WA pursues policy at a national level. There is a regional development section of the WATC located in each of the regions, pursuing development interests.

Local towns have a tourist bureau or centre whose primary function is visitor servicing, with a secondary marketing role. Some receive local government funding. As the most important and valuable marketing you can do for your small tourism business is in the immediate 50 kilometre radius, joining these associations would be beneficial.

The Eco Tourism Association of Australia is a national body, which has a strong voice in the development of eco-tourism policy and accreditation. Some Federal and State Government departments have tourism sections which may charge for their time.

The WATC and CALM have collaborated to develop the Nature Based Tourism Strategy, which has five guiding principles:

- ▶ Conserve the natural environment
- ▶ Involve and benefit local communities
- ▶ Improve the knowledge of visitors
- ▶ Provide quality services and products
- ▶ Foster an effective and efficient industry

### The need to be sustainable

The tourism industry involves a huge range of enterprises varying from multi-national corporations down to small scale and part-time operators. Tourism also covers a large range of activities such as visiting friends and relatives, family holidays at the beach, coach and tour excursions, walks in the country and trips to museums. Well, we have all at some time in our lives been tourists so we all know what it means to be one!

Tourism is a diverse and constantly changing industry. A healthy tourism industry is vital for a region's well-being. That is not to say that all regions need tourism but it can contribute to the economy and employment of an area, enrich our lives and bring pleasure and enjoyment. However, it must be planned in partnership with the host community or it can have many negative social and

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economic impacts. It imposes extra costs on local authorities in the provision of services, maybe leading to higher rates for residents, and on local communities in terms of traffic congestion during peak holiday times. Tourism carries the inherent danger in that it can destroy the very thing that generated it in the first place - **tourism must be sustainable** - the needs of today's visitor should not be met at the expense of future generations.

The English Tourist Board formulated 'Principles for Sustainable Tourism', which are well worth repeating here:

1. The environment has an intrinsic value, which outweighs its value as a tourism asset. Its enjoyment by future generations and its long-term survival must not be prejudiced by short-term considerations.
2. Tourism should be recognised as a positive activity with the potential to benefit the community and the place as well as the visitor.
3. The relationship between tourism and the environment must be managed so that the environment is sustainable in the long term. Tourism must not be allowed to damage the resource, prejudice its future enjoyment or bring unacceptable impacts.
4. Tourism activities and developments should respect the scale and nature of the place in which they are sited.
5. In any location harmony must be sought between the needs of the visitor, the place and the host community.

It is important to understand that nature-based eco- and cultural tourism grew out of a demand for an authentic individual travel experience, as opposed to fabricated mass tourism packaged tours. It has taken the tourism industry some time to come to grips with the principles of sustainable tourism, as stated above. As a result, organisations have been formed to bring together people with common interests. One of these organisations is FACET, Forum Advocating Cultural and Eco Tourism.

FACET formed in the early nineties when it became apparent that the many exciting and interesting developments taking place in the field of cultural and eco-tourism were happening in isolation from each



*So that visitors can see the waterbirds better, Connie Jones built a boardwalk at Matilda Lake Farm, Gingin.*

other. It is a WA-based network and information resource and its birth is directly related to the fact that the tourism industry of the time did not understand the principles and values of this newly emerging part of the industry. FACET is a unique organisation, there is nothing quite like it elsewhere in Australia, and if you are thinking of entering the tourism field, I would highly recommend joining.

In summary, talk to as many people in the industry as is possible.

### Strategically plan your tourism product

In considering the viability of a tourism product and defining the market, planning is crucial. The first place to start would be to carry out a situational analysis related to your product and the customers you hope to attract. This could take the form of:

- ▶ The region: where you fit - market, infrastructure, industry?
- ▶ Access: what is available eg rail, road, air?
- ▶ Strategic alliances: what opportunities exist to negotiate and form co-operative arrangements with nearby localities and communities in order to strengthen the tourism product being offered?
- ▶ Accommodation capacity: what is the range available locally - will it suit your customers?
- ▶ Tourism trends: what has been the growth in visitor numbers over the last five years? (A primary source for this information should be the Australian Bureau of Statistics and your local tourist bureau who generally record visitor numbers on a daily basis.)
- ▶ Tourism attractions: list and map significant tourist attractions that can complement what you are offering.
- ▶ Trends in external environment: assess strengths and weaknesses, eg regulatory control by government instrumentalities.
- ▶ Target markets: find out who the existing visitors are - do they suit your product?
- ▶ Market position: what image or icon represents your region? What are the key features in promoting the area?