

**EXPLORING COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY POTENTIAL IN NATURE BASED
TOURISM: THE FAR SOUTH COAST NATURE TOURISM AND RECREATION
PLAN**

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ABSTRACT

Often nature tourism development is viewed as a path to changing the economic industry base, security, and by implication towards creating community sustainability in rural areas. This paper argues that a sole focus on economic growth is too narrow a representation of the linkages between the tourism industry and host communities. It asserts that community sustainability is better seen as an integrating, encompassing concern for the cultural, social, economic and environmental sustainability potential of the community in a particular locality. The objectives of the 2004 *Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* are presented as a means of illustrating the challenge in developing a sustainable future for Australian rural communities.

Keywords: Nature tourism, community sustainability, social impact assessment, *Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan*

INTRODUCTION

Nature tourism is an important component of Australia's tourism sector contributing over \$18 billion to the Australian economy from both domestic and international sources (Tourism Australia, 2005). The principles of sustainable development which pervade nature tourism discourses have come to influence government legislation (Australian Commonwealth Government, 2003; Tourism New South Wales, ND; Tourism Victoria, Parks Victoria, & Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), 2006), as well as the business plans of a variety of individual tourism operations. Additionally, groups such as Ecotourism Australia have developed the Ecotourism Accreditation process to help operators move towards a formalised set of sustainability objectives (Buckley, 2001; Ecotourism Australia, nd). That operators in Australia's nature tourism sector are often living locally in rural areas suggests that nature based tourism can be used as a vehicle to provide for the delivery of sustainability outcomes to Australian communities. Nature Tourism may be defined as the industries serving:

'Domestic and international visitors who participate in at least one of the following five nature based activities while travelling in Australia: (1) visiting national parks or state parks, (2) visiting wildlife parks, zoos or aquariums, (3) visiting botanical or other public gardens, (4) bushwalking or rainforest walks, and (5) whale or dolphin watching (in the ocean)' (Tourism Australia, 2005).

In theory, nature tourism offers economic opportunities for local populations, maintains or enhances the environment, is a source of funds for protecting the National Estate, endangered species, and enhances environmental consciousness and understanding. However, very little research has been done exploring the reality for local communities who are moving toward nature tourism development. As these destinations experience increasing demand pressures, and natural resource use becomes more intense, the potential for conflict between maintaining environmental quality, maintaining cultural integrity and economic development is exacerbated

(Edgell, 2006). An example of the conflict that can exist between cultural integrity and economic development is the increased commodification of Aboriginal culture by the tourism sector (Beeton, 2000). Managing indigenous commodification is a problem for nature tourism managers in areas such as the New South Wales south coast where there is pressure to provide better access to high quality nature tourism experiences for visitors wishing to participate in Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Programs (Shepherd, Dodds, Robinson, Moore, & Department of Lands, 2004).

For nature tourism to develop in a manner that is socially and economically sustainable for local communities it is essential to engage in cooperative tourism planning. This requires cooperation between government agencies, between various administrative levels of government and between the public and private sectors. Sociopolitical factors appear to be a major reason for the lack of cooperative tourism planning in the New South Wales south coast study area and it is believed that other developing destinations with similar human environmental conditions would also be lacking in the use of cooperative planning principles. The tourism planning literature offers insights into how cooperative planning can be achieved and provides a guide for the development of this case study and its outcomes (Baud-Bovy, 1982; Dowling, 1993; Getz, 1986, 1987; Getz & Jamal, 1994; Gunn, 1994; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Murphy, 1985, 1988; Prentice, 1993; Simmons, 1994).

Within this tourism planning framework, this paper critically reviews how nature tourism is able to deliver sustainability to communities. It achieves this through a closer look at community level impacts resulting from coastal nature tourism development on the New South Wales far south coast. Nature tourism is often encouraged as a sustainability development tool in coastal protected areas (Agardy, 1993). 'Well-planned tourism provides economic and political incentives for management and for conservation, and may bring additional benefits to local communities and regional economies' (Agardy, 1993: 219). With this in mind the objectives of the 2004 *Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan*

(Shepherd et al., 2004) are examined as a case study into a specific application of community sustainability through nature tourism development in an Australian rural context. This case study was chosen as one of the few examples where a specific nature based tourism and recreation plan has been enacted in an area where traditional extractive industries are experiencing significant structural changes. The NSW far south coast context offered an opportunity to review specific planning for nature-based tourism rather than just a natural resource focus that has dominated the policy agenda (e.g. *Regional Forestry Agreements*).

The paper examines how the community development planning objectives of the far south coast nature tourism plan can be viewed in comparison to accepted principles of ecotourism. Conclusions regarding the effectiveness of national and local attempts towards community integration in nature tourism/ ecotourism will be framed according to the commonly accepted idea that tourism industry development is the ultimate parameter of industry sustainability. It will be argued that in many respects "alternative tourism" strategies in Australia have only superficially addressed host population sustainability due to being overly focused on industry/economic sustainability. Hunter (1995), in discussing the difference between "sustainable tourism" and "tourism that contributes to sustainable development", perceived an overly tourism centric approach to the way in which many industries approach the issue of sustainability. This paper will focus on one issue identified in Hunter (1995); the sectoral context for resource utilisation issues in a local nature tourism situation.

METHODOLOGY

The 2004 *Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* is used as a case study of a specific application of community sustainability through nature tourism development in rural Australia. It allows an examination of how community inclusiveness is theoretically an inherent component of ecotourism (Beeton, 2006), a reflection of ecotourism's foundation in "alternative

tourism” paradigms.

In discussing the methods employed in this analysis it should be noted that this paper should not be seen as an empirical appraisal of the community sustainability potential of nature tourism on the NSW far south coast. Empirical analysis, focussing on the town of Eden just north of the Victorian border, will be completed over the coming months in the course of ongoing Doctoral study by the paper’s lead author. This paper is designed to function as a desktop review of the objectives of the publicly available *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* (Shepherd, Dodds, Robinson, Moore, & Department of Lands, 2004) according to ecotourism principles. The *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* is discussed to illustrate the importance of including a community voice in nature tourism developments, whilst emphasising that this is an area of research deficiency on the NSW far south coast.

AN ECOTOURISM FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Ceballos – Lascurain defined ecotourism as ‘tourism that involves travelling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the objective of admiring, studying, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any cultural features that may be found there’ (1991 in Chapman, 1995: 54). Ecotourism’s focus on issues such as visitor education has seen the *National Ecotourism Strategy* define ecotourism as a more specific form of nature tourism (Allcock, Jones, Lane, & Grant, 1994). The idea that ecotourism is a sub component of a broader nature tourism sector has been taken on by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service who have emphasized that:

‘If planning were to ignore the rest of the [nature tourism] market and industry simply because they did not conform to a definition [of ecotourism] ... it would inevitably result in wrong decisions being made and the goals of ecologically sustainable development and conservation of biodiversity would not be achieved’

(New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1997: 26)

The close linkage between ecotourism and sustainability (Hardy & Beeton, 2001) marks ecotourism principles as an appropriate lens through which to examine the community sustainability potential of the broader nature tourism sector. The planning literature informs us that success for local communities is more likely if they are encouraged to participate in the decision-making process (Gunn, 1994; Dowling, 1993; Getz & Jamal, 1994; Jamal & Getz, 1995). A community participation approach is apparent in the local and regional benefits objective of the *National Ecotourism Strategy*. This objective states in part that ‘benefits of ecotourism should be equitably distributed with significant benefits accruing to the local community’ (Allcock et al, 1994: 17). Blamey (2001) links this ecotourism objective to the principles of intragenerational and intergenerational equity, which can be found throughout the sustainable development literature (Diesendorf, 2000; McManus, 2000).

The debate as to whether ecotourism in any location is ecologically, economically, socially and culturally sustainable is complicated by a variety of issues. One of the most prominent is the recognised lack of appropriate indicators and resources for comprehensively measuring tourism industry impacts at inherently diverse sites. Site diversity exists, not only in terms of the natural environment but also in terms of the social environment. It is not as simple as noting that what is good for the tourist industry in a particular locality is necessarily good for the local community (Ritchie, 1980). Tourism development often necessitates a fundamental re-organisation of a community’s economic structure. The appropriateness of tourism development must also be seen in terms of ideological opposition to environmentalism that is brought about through decades and generations of an extracted industry culture, as well as a fundamental change from extractive/tangible product delivery to that of being part of a service economy (Johnston & Payne, 2005: 21). Accordingly, there is a need to ensure that tourism development is appropriate to local rural conditions and that the social impacts of development are

adequately canvassed. Conceptualisations of local sustainability must therefore balance the potential economic and social returns from tourism development with an appreciation of the 'ways in which industries are embedded ... within their local regions' (Beer, Maude, & Pritchard, 2003: 95).

Tourism industry leaders and natural resource managers face significant challenges in the planning for sustainable development of tourism in protected areas (HaySmith and Hunt 1995). This is also the case in other Australian land management contexts such as *Regional Forest Agreements* where there is concern for often competing environmental, economic and social values of forests (Commonwealth Government of Australia & State Government of New South Wales, 1999). As with forestry, nature-based tourism can only survive when the resources on which it depends are protected. According to Whelan (1991: 4), 'ecotourism, done well, can be sustainable and a relatively simple alternative. It promises employment and income to local communities and needed foreign exchange to national governments, while allowing the continued existence of the natural resource base'. This last point gives implicit recognition to the need for adequate and appropriate management regimes (also see Valentine 1991), which foster environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation. As McKercher (1998: 191) points out:

A review of the principles of ESD [Ecologically Sustainable Development] offers valuable insights into how the tourism industry must act in relatively undisturbed areas. Underlying the entire ESD philosophy is a commitment to operate within the social and biophysical limits of the natural environment. To abide by this tenet, tour operators may have to trade off economic gain for ecological sustainability and, indeed, will have to accept that there are some places where tourism should be excluded.

Australia was the first country in the world to develop and implement a National Ecotourism Strategy to manage the growth of its ecotourism sector. In establishing a National Ecotourism Strategy in 1994, the federal Labor Government's intention was to formulate an overall policy framework for the planning, development and management of ecotourism in natural areas. The aims of the Strategy were to:

- Identify the major issues that affect, or are likely to affect, the planning, development and management of ecotourism in Australia;
- Develop a national framework to guide ecotourism operators, natural resource managers, planners, developers and all levels of government towards achieving a sustainable ecotourism industry; and
- Formulate policies and programmes to assist interested parties to achieve a sustainable and viable ecotourism industry (Charters, 1996).

The Ecotourism Strategy identified key issues concerning the planning, development and management of ecotourism in Australia, including:

- The development of ecologically sustainable approaches to tourism planning, development and management;
- Planning and regulation;
- Natural resource management;
- Infrastructure development;
- Impact monitoring;
- Marketing;
- Industry standards;
- Industry accreditation;
- Ecotourism education;
- Development of opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; and
- Equity considerations in the allocation and management of natural resources.

The National Ecotourism Strategy highlighted the importance of the government's role in establishing the necessary guidelines to develop ecotourism according to sustainability principles. However, following the victory of the Liberal and National parties at the 1996 federal election, support for the ecotourism strategy was withdrawn (Grant and Allcock, 1998). The impetus for any further actions was left with industry and State governments. This paper examines one specific instance where the State Government of NSW and, a collection of local stakeholder groups, are attempting to implement a strategy within a region of NSW. The paper evaluates how sustainable tourism principles have been applied in the particular nature tourism/ecotourism context. First, comment will be made on the NSW far south coast nature tourism sector and the development of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan*.

FAR SOUTH COAST NATURE TOURISM AND THE 2004 FAR SOUTH COAST NATURE TOURISM AND RECREATION PLAN

The far south coast region extends from the Kings Highway near Batemans Bay in the north to the NSW / Victorian border in the south. Nature tourism has become central to regional marketing strategies through: offshore whale, seal and dolphin watching industries; heritage sites; natural features and vast tracks of national parks and state forests. Nature tourism has been defined by NSW south coast commentators as 'all tourism in natural areas ... [ranging from] family picnics to wilderness walks and study tours ... [Nature tourism] focuses on the natural and cultural features of a site and education rather than just the activities undertaken (Shepherd et al., 2004; executive summary). Terrestrial nature based tourism in the NSW far south coast region is an emerging industry, one largely made up of a handful of small commercial operators working within National Parks and State Forests (Shepherd et al., 2004). The small operator nature of the industry and the lack of comprehensive surveys makes it difficult to establish nature tourism visitor numbers. This problem with ascertaining the size of the market has been noted as a systemic issue for nature tourism industries (Griffin & Vacaflores, 2004). The best available figures for tourism generally estimated that 4.2 million people visited the south coast area for 22.5 million visits in 2001 (Missing Link Consultants 2001 in Shepherd et al., 2004). In the Far South Coast's Bega Valley Shire, tourism is the Shire's largest employer of labour and the largest contributor to the Shire economy'. Between \$150 and \$200 million is estimated to be spent by tourists in the shire annually (Bega Valley Shire Council, 2005).

The *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* represents an attempt by the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, Eurobodalla Tourism, Sapphire Coast Tourism, State Forests New South Wales, Umburra Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Tours, Department of Lands and the community to formalise south coasts' nature tourism sector. The *Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* is a multi agency initiative to develop a regional tourism and recreation plan in line with the legislative requirements of the Eden and Southern NSW *Regional Forest Agreements* (Shepherd et al., 2004). The parameters for strategy development were dictated by the *Tourism New South Wales Masterplan* (Tourism New South Wales, 2005). Perhaps because of these tourism industry origins the far south coast nature tourism plan focuses on industry development issues including marketing, product, development (visitor experiences), provision of infrastructure, integrated planning and partnerships and market research (Shepherd et al., 2004). For tourism planning, trying to provide a balance of these issues is problematic, as Hassam (2000: 239) points out:

Sustaining the longevity of a given destination becomes a function of responding to market demand and competitive challenges. It is critical for future destination development plans to be compatible with market needs and environment integrity for the industry to maintain its economic viability

COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY AND ECOTOURISM PRINCIPLES

Since the formation of the first Australian working group on ecologically sustainable development (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 1992), there has been an appreciation not only of the need to ensure development contributes to host communities but also of the diversity of ways in which community development may be conceived:

Community development: The improvement of individual and community well being and welfare by following a path of economic progress that does not impair the welfare of future generations (Hawke 1991 in Diesendorf, 1997: 74)

Community development goals have become an important component of sustainable tourism dialogues (Hall and Richards 2000). Australia's *National Ecotourism Strategy* similarly refers to the need for the 'benefits of tourism [to] be equitably distributed with significant benefits accruing to the local community, even though ecotourism businesses may be based in other countries or involve national or multinational ownership' (Allcock et al., 1994: 17).

Community sustainability goals necessitate a broad conceptualisation of what development for communities entails. Should it be perceived in terms of economic growth, or in terms of a broad commitment to development in a manner that does not necessarily positively impact on economic imperatives such as GDP (Diesendorf, 1997)? There is recognition in planning documents that sustainable tourism requires integration and participation with local people, and not simply those with a formal connection to a tourism project (Hall & Testoni, 2004; Inskip, 1998).

The diversity of ways in which tourism development may relate to a local community also draws into focus the multitude of ways in which the community itself may be defined. Broadly, a community may be defined as a 'social network of interacting individuals, usually concentrated into a defined territory' (Johnston, 2000: 101). Bell and Newby (1978) noted that sociologists have tended to group studies of community into three distinct groups: community as a geographical expression, community as a sociological expression and community as a particular kind of human association irrespective of its local focus. For this paper community has been defined as, 'a grouping of up to several thousand households, who's occupants share common experiences and bonds derived from living in the same locality' (Long, 2000). This definition accepts the close geographical proximity to of the community to particular natural resources, which characterises a particular nature tourism development in many Australian rural contexts. It also appreciates the complex nature of the community's response to tourism development, a response that is frequently framed according to experience and different conceptualisations of appropriate nature tourism.

The complexity of industry community relations in a nature tourism context can be illustrated with respect to the following idea, 'sustainable development is not concerned with the preservation of the physical environment but with its development based on sustainable principles' (Holden, 2004: 165). In other words, the sustainable potential of tourism should not be limited to discussions of environmental and social preservation serving an industry purpose. Rather sustainable tourism is concerned with the development of the social and physical environment based on a broad set of sustainable development criteria. This necessitates tourism development being incorporated into the broader fabric of society at a local scale through tourism planning initiatives such as Local Agenda 21 (United Nations Environment Programme. Division of Technology, 2003).

The next section will discuss the degree to which the objectives of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* sponsors a link with the local community on the NSW far south coast.

COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY AND THE OBJECTIVES OF THE 2004 FAR SOUTH COAST NATURE TOURISM AND RECREATION PLAN

Effective integration of the local community into tourism management plans is problematic due to the tendency for many tourism operators and managers to equate holistic management objectives simply with finding a link between nature conservation and economic development (Hunter, 1995). The provision of a high quality tourism product is a theme in the five stated objectives of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* (Shepherd et al., 2004: 4-6):

- ‘Objective: Through the consideration of regional demand, gaps and identification of opportunities, develop high quality NTR¹ sites/products, especially’
- ‘Objective: Enhance cooperation, planning and partnerships between land management agencies, the industry and community for the successful and effective provision of NTR product and infrastructure’
- ‘Objective: To support marketing and promotional activities that highlights the regional character and particularly the diversity and wealth of NTR experiences available’
- ‘Objective: Encourage the development of accurate, informative, imaginative and entertaining approaches to the provision of both information and interpretation of the natural environment’
- ‘Objective: Encourage high quality NTR programs and tours that enable better access and experience to the regions outstanding natural environments for visitors, and especially to Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Programs’

Conservation and the economy are the values that dominate recent nature tourism and marketing strategies on the New South Wales south coast. Marketing was a key component of the sustainability objectives of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan*:

Objective: To support marketing and promotional activities that highlights the regional character and particularly the diversity and wealth of Nature Tourism and Recreation experiences available (Shepherd et al., 2004: 6)

Marketing strategies, such as the August 2006 the *Far South Coast Nature Tourism Project* (Anon, 2006b), have tapped into this principle of marketing the area’s natural features. What is evident, however, in such marketing strategies is that the benefits of nature tourism to the local population are often defined solely in terms of the potential for nature tourism to boost local employment prospects (Anon, 2006b). This is limiting with respect to the diversity of connections local people may have to natural resources. In terms of sectoral context, Hunter (1995: 161) notes that ‘no delineated human endeavours comprising one socio-economic sector, such as tourism, can ever exist in isolation from other sectors’. Much of Hunter’s (1995) discussion is connected to issues of over reliance on tourism development and the potential for so called “sustainable tourism” to develop in a manner which is not conducive to broader resource levels. Sectoral context has obvious implications for the Australian rural sector, defined as all areas of Australia outside the capital cities (McManus & Pritchard, 2000), given the tendency in these areas to view rural tourism development as an economic and social lifeline against declines in traditional primary industry sectors (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005). The idealised way in which rural commentators often view tourism may potentially mask the idea that development initiatives must ideally focus on ‘rural community development, incorporating strategies for the sustainability of the economic, social and cultural spheres of rural life’

¹ Nature tourism and recreation

(Herbert-Cheshire, 2000: 203). Frequently this involves the development of an integrated economic base for an area, of which tourism is often just a single component (Butler & Hall, 1998; Carr, 1999).

Over recent years, the issue of marine park and national park zonings have come to influence land usage on the NSW far south coast. Data currently being collected by this paper's authors in the townships of Eden and Bega is illustrating considerable community apathy to the impending marine park creation in Eden's TwoFold Bay, as well as a corresponding level of concern regarding the management of the area's national parks. Restrictions on community access to national park areas, which many in the community connect to rezoning of land from state forest to national park has come in for most criticism:

Question: What do you regard as the factors that have shaped south coast attitudes to state forests and national parks?

Response: The major factor that has influenced my attitude to the management of our forests is the arrogant attitude of the national parks and goodlife's in locking up various areas of forest and the regimentation of others (where you can park, what you can do (practically nothing), how much it will cost you (there was never going to be any entry charges to our parks HA HA!) to the point that it is no longer one of life's privileges to live in the Bega Valley. They can't manage what they have but they always want more.

What constitutes acceptable use of forest estates on the NSW south coast varies between NSW State Forests and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) zoning plans. While both State Forest and NPWS managers push a sustainability agenda for the area's forests, State Forests NSW perceive the need for an integrated approach to management, and the value of carefully managed timber harvesting (Arundell, 2005). The NPWS in contrast focuses more on the maintenance of natural and cultural heritage, only allowing industries such as nature tourism to continue if they support this broad conservation charter. NSW far south coast commentators recognise that there is potential for tourism to profit from the zoning of coastal areas as reserves:

Tourism marketing, and the enhancement of the Nature Coast brand, can also benefit from the Marine Park. Its objectives are consistent with the promotion of our region as environmentally clean and unspoilt (Anon, 2006a).

While the allocation of reserve status to coastal areas can have positive benefits for the tourism sector, not all residents of the south coast area have a financial stake in the environment. Rather many residents see sustainable usage of their environments specifically in terms of spiritual values, cultural values and identity values (Putney, 2003) of forests. Local access to forests for these purposes is thus seen as important. Tourism commentators seeking to understand the sectoral context of development must develop a means of incorporating such values into existing impact assessment procedures.

An aside to the development of reserve areas on the NSW far south coast is the issue of public consultation. The management of Australia's forests involves complex interplay between Commonwealth and State managers (Bartlett, 1999; Hollander, 2004; McDonald, 1999). This results in a situation where rural community sustainability in a tourism development context is subject to higher exogenous factors including government policy (Dibden & Cocklin, 2005; Sharlpey, 2003). Anecdotal evidence collected by the authors in the course of ongoing research in the Eden area of the NSW south coast is pointing to a situation where local communities often feel powerless to influence land management debates. This would appear to be contrary to the following two objectives of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan*, which advocate cooperation between management bodies, as well as cooperation with tourists

by means of interpretation strategies:

Objective: Enhance cooperation, planning and partnerships between land management agencies, the industry and community for the successful and effective provision of NTR product and infrastructure (Shepherd et al., 2004: 6)

Objective: Encourage the development of accurate, informative, imaginative and entertaining approaches to the provision of both information and interpretation of the natural environment (Shepherd et al., 2004: 6)

It is not our intention to comment on cooperation with tourists in this paper, our focus being on local south coast communities. The need for organised stakeholder interaction between local communities and land managers is reflected in the long history of forest management in Australia. Conflicts regarding the use of environments such as Lake Pedder, Fraser Island and the Kakadu National Park have developed as a result of often competing goals of government, industry and conservationists (Ananda & Herath, 2003). Accordingly sustainability assessments in the national *Regional Forest Agreement* process placed a premium on the issue of stakeholder involvement (Ananda & Herath, 2003; Proctor, 2000). Within the *Regional Forest Agreements* there was to be a departure from traditional centralised management approaches in favour of 'a participatory model emphasising open discussion and the recognition of different stakeholder groups and their values' (Musselwhite & Herath, 2005: 581). What is interesting is that the objective of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* is that stakeholder cooperation in tourism planning has, as its ultimate aim, the provision of the nature tourism and recreation product. There is seemingly little concern for understanding the views of the broader community and the ways in which cooperation may facilitate the attainment of a resource use scheme, which is reflective of the local population's views regarding the sustainability of the industry sector.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TOURISM POLICY AND COMMUNITIES

Nature tourism is an important part of Australia's tourism landscape, often developing in rural areas that are characterised with appropriate natural resources to justify a tourism market. Tourism planners appreciate the economic value of Australia's nature tourism sector. Indeed the economic value of the nature tourism industry is one of the most commonly cited justifications for nature tourism development in rural Australia. What is less well understood is the nature of the relationship between the nature tourism sector and its sectoral community context (Hunter, 1995).

Tourism must operate in a particular social, economic and environmental context. The authors suggest that tourism planners have tended to see the linkages between the tourism industry and society too narrowly. There has been a tendency to focus on the contribution that community may make to industry. The *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* case study demonstrates the economic focus to which this industry community relationship is often defined. It demonstrates that whilst there is an appreciation amongst planners for community involvement in development, there is also a tendency to see the partnership between different tourism stakeholders solely in terms of their ability to provide nature tourism products and infrastructure. This is reinforced through the environmental planning process essentially being separate to tourism planning in an environmental or industry context.

This paper advocates a local community and biocentric view of the environment and the nature tourism industry, in order to achieve a balanced outcome for sustainable tourism development in rural communities. Mowforth and Munt (1998) suggest that sustainability (and ecotourism as a form of sustainable tourism) is such a vague, contested concept, that it is easily manipulated to

support and enhance the power of industry interests and those who stand to gain. The development of checks and balances is essential to be able to provide measurable parameters. While we are a long way from a nature-based tourism industry that can claim to be sustainable in a local community context; the principles of the *2004 Far South Coast Nature Tourism and Recreation Plan* indicate that managers may be prepared to countenance the idea of a locally sustainable tourism industry if a way can be found to accurately measure community attitudes. Ongoing research by the paper's lead author into the use of psychological value measurements in Social Impact Assessments will hopefully help address issue.

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