



RANGELAND KANGAROOS: A WORLD CLASS WILDLIFE EXPERIENCE

By David B Croft

We have failed to capitalise on big mobs of kangaroos in the vastness of the outback as one of the world's great wildlife experiences. Rural communities are being deprived of tourism income while the focus is on contentious management of kangaroos for skins and hides.

Findings

The attitudinal survey was conducted amongst visitors to Sturt National Park between December 1998 and December 1999. Control groups were surveyed at Broken Hill and Kinchega National Parks during the summer, autumn and winter school holidays. Visitors to all three locations were primarily domestic tourists from New South Wales or Victoria travelling as couples or families in their own vehicle. National park visitors were usually self-sufficient bush campers. The profile was inconsistent with the typical international visitor engaged in nature-based activities, who tends to be in the 20-29 year age group, travelling by less independent means and using more permanent accommodation. National park visitors, especially those visiting Sturt, visited many regional townships and protected areas, crossing state boundaries especially into the Cooper Creek and channel country. Wildlife viewing consumed a large part of the holidays of all visitors to this part of Outback New South Wales, more so if they visited a national park. Kangaroos were a strong attraction amidst diverse landscapes in an environment praised for its wilderness qualities.

Visitors typically appreciated the quality of the infrastructure in Sturt (i.e. access roads, walking trails, wildlife viewing locations and campgrounds) and claimed it enhanced their experience beyond expectations. However, dust, rough roads, flies and lack of amenities such as showers were detractors for some. There was a gap between expectations and experience with wildlife and so visitors were

responsive to new products that would enhance the experience and narrow this gap. They were particularly attracted to written guides and information about attractions in the park which are currently lacking, to opportunities for close observation of wildlife in the day and night, and better quality accommodation provided this did not detract from the 'undeveloped' nature of the Outback (e.g. tented camps and use of existing pastoral infrastructure).

A number of operators, mainly running tours originating in Broken Hill, take clients to Sturt National Park. In general, most of the Park's attractions are accessed in a similar frequency to independent visitors. However, operators tend to accommodate clients in hotels and motels in Tibooburra rather than the Park's campgrounds. Sturt National Park is typically one destination in tours that include historic towns/villages and other conservation reserves. Kangaroos are considered a high-quality wildlife attraction by operators and Sturt National Park delivers a good experience with them to their clients. Most operators were receptive to the sale of guidebooks and development of free wildlife viewing platforms to expand their clients' experiences.

Implications to industry

The study clearly shows that mobs of kangaroos, centre stage on a vast outback landscape, are a strong and integral attraction to Outback New South Wales. The large regional national parks provide an additional attraction of a landscape free from domestic stock and unbounded by the fences of the pastoral industry. However, tourists venturing much beyond Broken Hill and its nearby attractions are well-resourced independent travellers on self-sufficient camping tours. The more time-constrained and less well resourced international and domestic tourist is poorly serviced except on an infrequent long-distance

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tour or through hire of a campervan. Tourists arriving at Sturt National Park find much variety in the landscape but insufficient activities to hold them in the park for long. New products should focus around the well-placed campgrounds and give each a unique character and set of activities so that no journey to Sturt is complete unless one lingered in each place. Accommodation should be appropriately enhanced to comfort travellers weary of long distances and rough and dusty roads. However, such developments should be sensitive to the wilderness attractions of the park, using existing historic buildings from the former pastoral era and/or tented camps in a spectacular locale for a privileged high-paying few. Tourists need to be better informed through guidebooks about the history and ecology of the landscapes they view, and the drama in the lives of their floral and faunal occupants.

There are good prospects for one or more local operators in Tibooburra to service clients to Sturt National Park and other local attractions. Backpackers and younger travellers may be encouraged to travel to the region if a mini-bus or some appropriate form of public transport operated on demand from Broken Hill. Fly-in safaris should tap a wealthier more time-constrained clientele as Tibooburra has an all-weather strip for twin-engine light aircraft. These clients could be offered an Outback experience with abundant wildlife immersed in a history of

heroic exploration and pioneering families in the pastoral industry.

Implications for community

Rural communities will derive some benefit from diversification into 'bush tucker' of which the kangaroo game-meat industry will continue to be a major player. However, this should not be at the cost of a strong, dynamic and profitable tourism based on wildlife, with the large and specious kangaroo populations at centre stage. Some pastoral leaseholders will grasp the opportunity to exploit the natural heritage features of their properties in a nature-based tourism enterprise. They should be encouraged to do so and not constrained by managing their leasehold simply for pastoralism, and the kangaroos on their properties as pests. Others will continue pastoralism as their predominant activity but may diversify into 'farm stays' and perhaps 'bush tucker' enterprises with support from indigenous communities. These enterprises may emphasise their pastoral and/or aboriginal heritage against a backdrop of ecologically sustainable management of previously badly abused and degraded lands. All will profit by increased commercial activity through nature-based tourism. This will sustain financial services in these communities, improve road quality and the frequency of maintenance, enhance information technology, provide employment and sustain shopfront government services.

Implications for management agencies

There is considerable enthusiasm for a high-quality nature-based tourism industry in the region and in the regional national parks. New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service, in particular, needs to develop a strong tourism policy, which sees Sturt National Park as the 'Outback Icon' of the protected areas system under their control. They need to recognise the assets found in a large park where the populations of the park's residents have a chance to be self-regulatory and shift dramatically across a varied landscape. They need to be sensitive to management issues relating to pastoral infrastructure, especially artificial watering points, and develop imaginative and realistic policies, which take note of nature-based tourist activities rather than bulldoze problems away. They can look to the management of dry land parks in southern Africa for models of appropriate practice. They should be encouraged to restore biodiversity and suppress introduced exotic pests but at a landscape scale with realistic expectations for the future. The Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) needs to address the quality of major access roads so that all-weather access is reasonably possible to hubs of tourism activity such as Tibooburra and White Cliffs. Agencies need to address trans-state boundaries as obviously much of the tourism activity at Sturt National Park crosses into South Australia and to a lesser extent Queensland.

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This report is available from the Cooperative Research Centre for Sustainable Tourism bookshop, online at www.crctourism.com.au/bookshop.

This report is part of a 23 volume Wildlife Tourism Series that forms the foundation of current knowledge of Australia's unique flora and fauna and how they are (or may be) integrated into the business of tourism

Kangaroos on a vast outback landscape, are a strong attraction to the Outback
Photo Tourism Qld

