



ASSESSMENT OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR OVERSEAS TOURISM BASED ON WILD KANGAROOS

By David B Croft and Neil Leiper

Wildlife professionals furnished 113 assessments of sites that they judged provide a high-quality experience with macropods. The sites covered all states and territories but most were in Queensland and New South Wales where more respondents had undertaken research and scientific endeavour with the kangaroo family. The responses favoured large kangaroos and wallabies that are easily seen, are abundant and habituate to human presence if not hunted. Most were found within existing protected areas and forests, and few on private lands where conflict with agricultural enterprises is often perceived. At most sites, all weather access by conventional vehicle was practical and little physical effort need be expended to view wild macropods. Respondents favoured an expansion of tourism activity at most sites, except those last remnant populations of highly endangered species. However, many recommended that new sites, such as in water catchments, should initially be opened up with small groups of tourists under the control and advice of an expert guide.

Indices of the potential quality of a wildlife tourism experience with each species (and some rare sub-species) of macropod were calculated from relevant aspects of morphology, ecology and behaviour. These scores supported the assessment by wildlife professionals that larger, partially day-active, gregarious species in open habitats would guarantee a more rewarding experience than those solitary, nocturnal, cryptic species in often impenetrable habitat. However, if the attraction were a species' rarity then many of the latter would be the targets of observation requiring specialised activities at night. Centres of high macropod richness in the forests of northern New South Wales, tropical Queensland, the wet-dry tropics of Northern Territory and Western Australia and the forests of south-western Western Australia offer great potential for kangaroo-based tourism if examination of the diversity of forms is the goal. If high abundance and the large well-known kangaroos were the focus of attention then a number of outback areas would fulfil this goal, especially in the pastoral

zones of Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. Each offers a different range of species diversity. Some of the most abundant populations of large kangaroos reside off protected areas and so some pastoral properties could exploit this asset, as high abundance is an important attraction in wildlife tourism.

Current high-quality sites for macropod viewing do not generally serve tourism markets well. They are distant from centres of high visitation or off preferred routes of travel. They may also lack other attractions that would encourage tourism activity. Euroka Clearing in the Blue Mountains National Park rates highly but is quite small and may already be over its tourist carrying capacity. Thus, it is vulnerable to degradation by trampling and over-crowding and opportunities beckon for other sites to be developed close to Sydney. High-ranking sites on the quality of the wildlife experience with macropods, such as Sturt National Park in New South Wales and Idalia National Park in Queensland, are distant from the main and preferred centres of tourism activity. Idalia does benefit from other attractions in the region, especially at Longreach.

Implications to industry

One of Australia's greatest assets is the quality and variety of its natural environment. In spite of strong evidence for continued growth in market demand for nature tourism product, tourism master plans, such as New South Wales to 2010, observe that this potential is relatively underused or untapped. The report identifies significant opportunities for the development of kangaroo-based tourism within the national parks and native forests and on private lands, with a focus on the eastern states that garner most international visitors. In most instances, kangaroos will not be the sole attraction but a significant part of a set of key taxa, as found in the nature-based tourism enterprises on Kangaroo Island in South Australia. They may be an essential indicator in the landscape of the conservation of natural heritage, such as in the outback, providing a sense of the 'real' Australia.

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Or, they may be an attraction for their diversity, unusual habits or even rarity to a very small market of touring 'mammalogists'.

The principal markets for such product will be free and independent travellers (FIT) or the specialist visitor (e.g. backpacker, nature tourism). The group or mass market may only be adequately served by fauna parks and zoos unless more sites, like Euroka Clearing, can be developed with an appropriate carrying capacity close to capital cities, and managed following ecologically sustainable development (ESD) principles. In contrast, self-drive international (and domestic) travellers are more likely to visit regional tourism nodes where the viewing of wild kangaroos can be offered as an attraction and an essential element of the experience.

Implications for community

Both town and country need to re-think their relationship with wildlife, especially the more prolific and obvious elements such as the large kangaroos and some wallabies. Their persistence and relative prosperity is not a measure of a battle lost in 'taming the land' but a valuable remnant of a once more diverse and fascinating fauna that proclaims a clean, green environment. Communities might one day emblazon their portals with Australia's best place to see 'Big Red' or whatever species and thereby profit from the economic activity engendered by wildlife tourism. We still have large native mammals in our hinterland so we need to raise this to the world community as a masthead of national pride. The view of kangaroos in the

landscape undoubtedly authenticates the Australian experience.

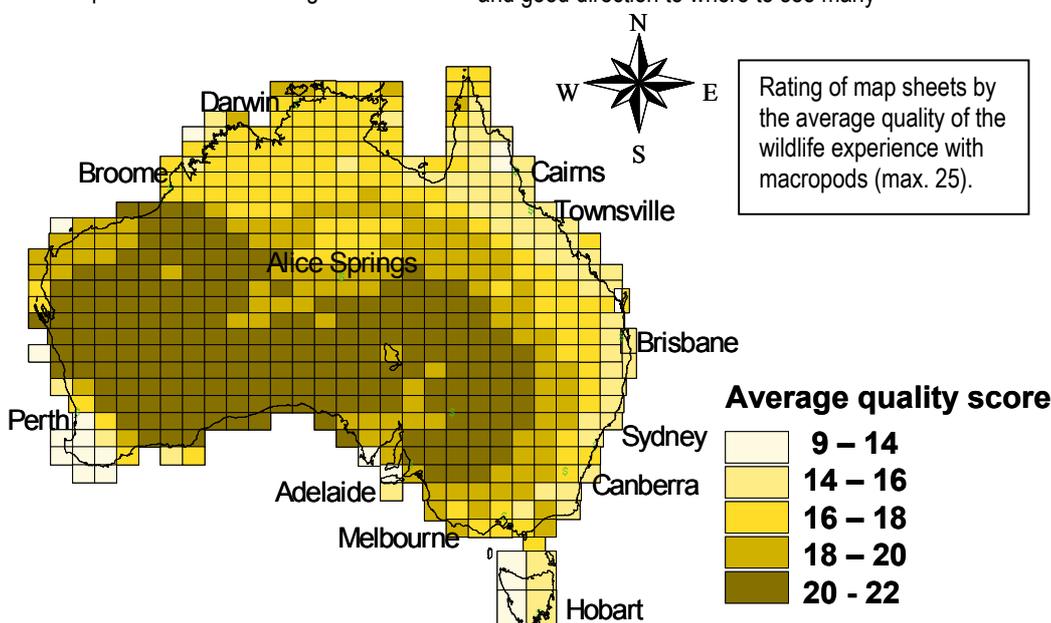
Implications for management agencies

National Parks and Wildlife agencies typically have excellent interpretative signs and poster boards about macropods at visitor centres, campgrounds and/or along trails in landscapes where they are a major faunal element. However, FIT and specialist visitors are likely to increasingly use the Internet and web sites in planning holidays. New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service has made an exceptional effort to create an atlas of the state's fauna. The web site (www.npws.nsw.gov.au/wildlife/species.htm) allows ready access to fauna lists, some incomplete, to most of its estate. The paper information on wildlife in parks and reserves is good and specifically directs the reader to areas where kangaroos (but not other macropods) are best seen. Further information on wildlife is limited to brief statements about a park's or reserve's assets and constraints, and obscure spatial information. Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife offers a much superior source of electronic information with detailed maps and descriptions of parks and reserves. These guide visitors to places to see some of the macropods but report in generalities about others. Parks Victoria provides similar details to Tasmania and more direction about the important floral and fauna elements of a park or reserve. The site has advice and links to tourism operators. Likewise, CALM in Western Australia has comprehensive information on parks and their flora and fauna and good direction to where to see many

macropod species, especially the more unusual ones.

The wildlife agencies should each develop a plan for the promotion and management of wildlife tourism, something that currently seems to be lacking. However, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia seem to be making effective progress in informing domestic and international visitors about opportunities on their protected areas' estates. The State and Territory Wildlife agencies typically have forms of cooperative agreements with landholders to encourage and assist the conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat on private land (eg. 'Land for Wildlife' programs in New South Wales, Victoria). Encouragement, assistance and direction of wildlife tourism with macropods and other taxa would give impetus to such programs.

Wildlife authorities and other land management agencies need to recognise that 'big mobs of roos', and all the diversity of their kind, are important assets in the natural estate. These species, large, obvious and centre stage provide a wonderful focus for wildlife tourism and the appreciation of Australia's endemic natural heritage. Acquisition of large tracts of land with a mosaic of habitats will be necessary to sustain populations on reserves and these will have to be adaptively managed. Neighbours might be encouraged to contribute to wildlife conservation through incentives to develop and support wildlife tourism. Likewise further off-reserve conservation could be similarly encouraged.



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