



Wildlife Tourism Australia Inc. Promoting the sustainable development of a diverse wildlife tourism industry that supports conservation

Roundtable Report

Wildlife Tourism Values and Challenges: Balancing the needs of wildlife, tourists, operators and residents.

Conference, Wildlife Tourism Australia Inc., October 2018, Tasmania

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Introduction

Balancing the needs of animals, tourists, tour operators (including tour guides, managers of ecolodges, keepers in wildlife parks and others) and local residents can be complicated. Animals have physical and emotional needs, which may or may not be compatible with human activity, and impacts can range from mild and temporary irritation to life-threatening (e.g. disturbed penguins exposing their eggs to freezing temperatures). How close can we get to different animals (both wild and captive) without negative impact? How do we know if they are mildly or seriously disturbed? How does this differ between species and between individuals? How much space do captive animals need, and how much does this differ between species? How stressful is boredom and how can we alleviate it? How much socialising do different species need? What kind of noises stress them? Do they hate being handled or interacted with, or do some of them enjoy it? Many tourists want reliable sightings, close views and good photos. Sometimes this is easy, sometimes not. To what extent can we intrude on an animal's private life for close encounters without unduly disturbing it? How do operators delight their tourists while not infringing on animal welfare and biodiversity conservation and also continue to stay afloat financially? How can wildlife tourism benefit a regional area but not bring problems of 'over-tourism'? How can local governments weigh up the advantages and disadvantages in increased numbers of different kinds of tourists?

Philosophical

Considering potential conflicts between the needs of wildlife (welfare and conservation) and the needs or desires of tourists, discuss:

- What lines can never be crossed? Under what circumstances can we never justify the use of animals for tourism?
- What kinds of wildlife tourism can be problematical (e.g. feeding, selfies) but in high demand or could have benefits for conservation or education?

- Under what conditions are these activities acceptable or not so? What compromises could be found?
- What alternatives could be offered? Can we understand the desires of the tourist and offer something else to satisfy them?

Science/Knowledge

- What do we already know about the behavioural and ecological needs of animals that could be used in designing **tours** conducive to their welfare and conservation?
- What do we already know about the behavioural and ecological needs of animals that could be used in designing **captive conditions** conducive to their welfare and conservation?
- How can we provide better access to research information for tour operations?
- What do we need further research on to enhance best practice?
- What do we know about the variety of tourist attitudes, including changing trends?

Action

- How do we start implementing some reasonable and workable compromises between needs of animals and tourists (consider a variety of tourist types: life-listers, thrill-seekers, etc.)?
- What substitutions, compromises, denials or innovative ways to satisfy them can we provide?
- What are some good examples already happening?
- How do we ban or phase out bad practices local residents may depend on, especially in regional or poverty areas?
- How do we educate tourists and tourism agencies to avoid cruel or environmentally-damaging operations without disadvantaging others that have superficial similarities but doing good work?

Final discussion

How do we best **distribute current knowledge** to

- the tourism industry,
- conservation managers, and
- governments (all levels)?

What are some important **knowledge gaps** we need our researchers to address? How might we **communicate** this to researchers, including prospective post-grad students? Who might we approach to **support** their applications for research grants?

Is there a general message or two from this conference we can submit as a **press release**?

Discussions on Philosophical Questions

What lines can never be crossed?

(Under what circumstances can we never justify the use of animals for tourism?)

There were several general comments such as:

- any cruelty
- anything that compromises welfare
- anything that causes physical or psychological harm to animals

There was general agreement to such principles, but also a realisation they could be interpreted differently by different people – e.g. some view any kind of captivity as cruelty or any kind of human-wildlife interaction as compromising welfare while others consider some forms of both to be acceptable.

More specific suggestions included:

- Any contact that causes psychological or physical pain or distress for entertainment of visitors
- Forcing animals to perform unnatural behaviours (e.g. circus tricks such as elephants balancing on one leg)
- Cruel methods of training (e.g. common methods of training young elephants in Asia)
- Forcing human interaction on animals that are not temperamentally suited to such activity
- Forcing animals to 'work' (interactions, photos etc.) for too long
- Disfiguring animals in preparation for interactions (e.g. removal of fangs or claws)
- Sedating animals for interactions
- Hooding (sensory deprivation) and chaining animals (e.g. elephants) between interactions
- Removing animals from parents to hand-rear for visitor interaction (e.g. lion cubs in some South African operations)
- Fishing practices that do not minimise suffering and swiftly kill the fish as soon as they are caught [note: WTA only deals with non-consumptive wildlife tourism]
- Removing animals from their natural environment and keeping them in much different surroundings for the purpose of entertainment (and profit)
- Disturbing sensitive species (e.g. bats at Pine Gap), excessive use of bird calls causing birds to waste energy by constantly defending their territories from mythical intruders
- Anything that causes irreversible damage to habitat or conservation outcomes
- Anything that interferes with conservation breeding of threatened species

Other points included:

- There are complications in improving some situations. Longstanding cultures such as elephants in Sri Lanka have certain traditions where cultural practices heavily involve wildlife and domesticated animals, raising the question of where to draw the line between wildlife and domesticated animals. Fishing causes distress to fish, but it is a hugely popular activity in Australia and elsewhere.
- Interactive experiences should always include an educational message or conservation outcome

What kinds of wildlife tourism can be problematical (e.g. feeding, selfies) but in high demand or could have benefits for conservation or education?

Some problems:

- Selfies, interactions (feed, swim with etc.) close-up photos and recreational fishing are all very popular.
- Forced interactions not initiated by wildlife – e.g. whale watching, penguin watching, - are not always based on an understanding how different species behave
- Tours to see threatened species (e.g. night parrot) could threaten the survival of those species, either by disturbing the animals or alerting illegal wildlife traffickers to their whereabouts.
- If people are allowed to touch or feed animals in one place they may expect they can do it in the wild too

- Use of selfies and other photos can prompt people to go to increasing efforts to get the perfect photo, which can put themselves and the animals in danger
- The environment is often damaged just by humans being there
- Visitors often regard their presence and actions in wilderness as a right, rather than a privilege
- Social media and WT – selfies

Some benefits:

- Profits from wildlife encounters (photos, feeding, walking with, etc.) can be used to fund conservation efforts (e.g. money from tiger encounters at Dreamworld help to fund rangers in Sumatra, money from koala-cuddling photos at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary helps to fund the wildlife hospital)
- Wildlife tourism that leads to economic development of regional areas increases local public and government acknowledgment of the value of wildlife
- Mass tourism can provide an opportunity for mass messaging for key conservation outcomes
- Interactions with wildlife (e.g. feeding or swimming with) may instil a level of empathy and connection to wildlife which otherwise would not have been triggered
- Paying for hunting in areas of wildlife overpopulation can subsidise national parks [note: WTA only deals with non-consumptive wildlife tourism]

Under what conditions are these activities acceptable or not so? What compromises could be found?

Controlled interactions could be allowed with animals unlikely to be stressed (considering both species and individual temperaments) if:

- Results of scientific findings on stress and vigilance are applied, to make better regulations for interactive experiences
- Selfies and animal interaction in certain species always uphold animal welfare as the main priority
- Feeding, selfies and flash photos should do not occur unless there is proper supervision and quality education during the experience, ideally including behavioural outcomes such as the encouragement of donations for buying conservation land, signing petitions to support the banning of plastic bags etc.
- Positive reinforcement is given to captive wildlife establishments for providing for vet checks etc .
- Feeding only involves appropriate food, and especially where money for animal food goes towards conservation
- The animal can choose whether or not to interact, never forced

What alternatives could be offered? Can we understand the desires of the tourist and offer something else to satisfy them?

Suggestions included:

- Virtual reality (e.g. up in the trees with the flying foxes, active eagle nest, Tasmanian devils at feeding station) for an adrenalin rush without contact or close viewing –
- Adventurous ways of travelling (cycling in outback or on mountain tracks, kayaking, horseback) to view wildlife may also provide an adrenalin rush for those who would otherwise either not be interested or want something more active than wildlife-viewing, such as hunting or interactions
- Instead of advertising “sightings guaranteed”, operators can market whale-watching etc. as a habitat experience with the possibility of seeing the animals
- A critter-cam to show animals in natural habitat and behaviour, then include in-person interpretation of the habitat
- Instead of tourists feeding, they watch as keeper feeds in captive situations [note: maybe pointing out immediate behaviour of the animals while doing so]
- Using taxidermy specimens as an educational tool to minimise impact on animals - very beneficial with nocturnal species (alternate technology)

Other points included:

- Operations can be limited by licenses, certification etc., to encourage only those engaged in good practice
- Tourists can be encouraged to love/respect/coexist with wildlife, not to expect them to interact

Discussion of Science/Knowledge Aspects

What do we already know about the behavioural and ecological needs of animals that could be used in designing tours conducive to their welfare and conservation?

We know that:

- Animals are sentient, and feel pain, anxiety and other sensations and emotions. Although not possible to know exactly how an animal feels, all evidence points to vertebrates and many invertebrates having feelings.
- Animals need the opportunity to feed, breed and rest without disturbance that might lead to them wasting significant amounts of energy or choosing suboptimal foraging areas, failing to catch prey or failing to successfully breed
- Animals have activity budgets, with regular feeding, breeding and resting times (daily and seasonally, and age-dependent). Tours can be designed around this, with time restrictions, zoning etc. to ensure no disturbance at critical times
- Over-use of bird calls can cause stress – especially alarm or male territorial calls
- Possums (and penguins) are more distressed by ‘predator noises’ (crunching gravel etc.) than quiet human voices
- Macropods are easily stressed if chased or badly frightened
- Forced interactions can lead to stress in animals (e.g. dolphins in captive situations)
- Stress can lower reproduction rate
- Some animals seek interaction, others don’t – varies between and within species
- Some animals don’t like being forced together
- Animal behaviour and body language is often specific to species and individuals – we cannot use a one-size-fits-all when developing rules
- Tracking of visitors’ cars showed speeding between dusk and dawn
- Some people deliberately aim cars at small animals

How should this knowledge be applied?

- There should be a welfare framework when developing tours as there is for management of captive wildlife
- Guides need to know the science and stay up to date
- Individual species’ diurnal clocks can be used as criteria for tour design
- Comparison of scientific studies of animals vs behavioural studies of humans could assist in finding a happy medium to ensure animals’ needs are met as well as the visitor having a positive experience
- Animals can to varying degrees adapt to each other and to us. We also have the ability to adjust our own behaviour. We are in their environment: we can experience their environment and fit in with their needs.

What do we already know about the behavioural and ecological needs of animals that could be used in designing captive conditions conducive to their welfare and conservation?

What do we know?

- Mentally active species (e.g. monkeys) need a lot of enrichment
- Animals can be stressed by close proximity of humans, lack of a private place to shelter, various sounds and lack of space for exercise
- Animals can be stressed without showing outward signs – heart rate measurement, faecal analysis and other measurements can often detect this
- Much of the knowledge mentioned above is relevant to the captive condition also

How should this knowledge be applied?

- Leave room in planning and construction changes to alter the captive conditions as needed, improving conditions as new knowledge/data is found
- Cater to the needs of each individual, not generalising a species or group of species
- Size of enclosure should be relative to animals' needs (home range/ranging, need for mental stimulation)
- Nocturnal enclosure should be provided for nocturnal mammals – undisturbed by observations (an unobtrusive video-cam in the resting quarters could still show the animal to the public)
- Large populations of captive wildlife within a park or zoo can help for rotating animals on view or being used for interactions
- Life-cycles should be understood and catered for

Other points made included:

- Managers and keepers need to stay up to date on information about the animals and on best practice generally
- More information is required on fauna (including behavioural responses) and flora
- The standard five freedoms must be applied when conducting talks/encounters:
 - Freedom from hunger and thirst: by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
 - Freedom from discomfort: by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
 - Freedom from pain, injury or disease: by prevention through rapid diagnosis and treatment.
 - Freedom to express normal behaviour: by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
 - Freedom from fear and distress: by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.
- Certification programs are useful to encourage good practice

How can we provide better access to research information for tour operations?

It was generally agreed that access to latest scientific knowledge for tour operators (including guides and ecologists and wildlife park managers) was important, but often the information was not getting through to those who could take action on it.

Suggested solutions included:

- Platforms to bring tourists and researchers together [note: the WTA conferences, workshops and website always aim to do this]
- Promote opportunities like this (conferences etc.) to get the research out and among other researchers who it could help
- Have a database audited by a third party. This could be a criterion for Eco certification [note: not sure the precise meaning of this one]
- Central website (federal? State subsection?), directing to areas of interest
- Direct operators to research results and direct researchers to projects
- Make research papers subsidised for tour operators [note: the expense of downloading many of the published journal articles is indeed a deterrent]
- Open access journals [note: yes, these are very useful, to decrease the expense of those trying to keep up with latest research]
- All government funded data should be open access with a caveat about its interpretation
- WTA could feed resources into a database so people can find them [note: this has been planned for some years but delayed through restricted time of volunteers and restricted finances to pay helpers]
- Resource hub – larger organisations such as WTA assisting smaller organisations in gaining access to information
- Association to act as a portal – e.g. ZAA [note: or maybe cooperation between ZAA and WTA in this, as WTA also includes tours and eco-accommodation]
- Scientific research disseminated in layman's terms
- Collaborate with universities
- Networking
- Have an inclusive relationship with researchers (makes operators more legitimate)
- Social media – e.g. Neil Degrasse Tyson – make people interested in science again
- Tour companies can lead the way – compiling research information for guides/staff
- Research can be part of the organisation
- Tour operations help research and operators request research. Central place for suggestions? [note: WTA is attempting to expand the wildlife research network on the website]
- Access to citizen science involving participants (tourists) [note: WTA is attempting to expand the wildlife research network on the website]
- Bolster/create baseline data. Species lists / population data often comes from anecdotal sources

What do we need further research on to enhance best practice?

Suggestions for further important research included:

- Data on stress indicators and positive hormones for variety of species and variety of situations
- Effects of frequency of visitor approach to animals
- Effects of frequency of spotlighting, including how spotlighting affects non-target animals
- Tourism movements – what are people doing? Where are the hotspots of activity? Who is visiting? Why are they choosing to come here?
- How to communicate with visitors when you're not with them (how to prepare effective apps, signs, self-guided brochures etc.)
- How to address messages so that target audiences will want to make a change. Kids as an audience are easier to target – how do you get adults to change?

What do we know about the variety of tourist attitudes, including changing trends?

- A growing awareness of environmental and welfare issues, and a social trend to be ethics based (it's 'cool' to be caring about the environment), though certainly not all follow this
- Millennials more likely to be critical of poor practice, to want an experience, and to say they played a part in conservation
- However, many find it difficult to get past what they want and consider what the animal wants
- People want the 'cute and fluffy' and are less interested in less charismatic species
- General education is poor – we tend to get stuck in our educational niche and there are lots of old wives' tales
- An expectation of natural environments in native situations
- A growing awareness of Indigenous/cultural issues

Action

How do we start implementing some reasonable and workable compromises between needs of animals and tourists (consider a variety of tourist types: life-listers, thrill-seekers, etc.)?

General suggestions included:

- Code of practice written by scientific experts and ensuring they are updated to meet current 'best practice' and underpin animal welfare
- Regular training of ALL staff
- Certification of operators and staff
- The carrot approach should be used, not just the stick: e.g. giving further promotion of tours/practices which benefit tourists and wildlife, rather than just shaming those indulging in poor practices
- Restrictions/regulations on tour operators
 - providing alternatives, such as free educational programs
 - ensure guides are educated / have control over their tour group – could restrict tour sizes for a better experience for tourists and the protection of the animals / sites, based on the species needs
 - restrict access to certain sites / operators and educate people why
 - divert stress on wild populations by moving people to captive wildlife encounter (like the glow worm cave or the devil un-zoo format)

Suggestions for reducing impact on animals in the wild:

- Speed cameras before wildlife collision black spots, with smiley faces (possibly smiling wombats etc.) if below the speed limit and frowning ones otherwise
- Guides need to educate visitors on what might stress an animal before they get out of the vehicle
- Operators should try not to send mixed messages – e.g. they should make it clear when feeding or otherwise interacting with wildlife in a designated area that this is not permissible in other situations, and ensure they clarify what NOT to do (what not to feed, where not to feed)
- Guides and signage about restrictions should explain reasons! People are generally more inclined to obey a request if they understand why it is made, not just assume the authorities are being difficult.
- Talks to schools could raise awareness of future tourists (and current family travellers)

What substitutions, compromises, denials or innovative ways to satisfy them can we provide?

Two of the major alternatives for tourist experiences were mentioned as

- captive: up close and personal
- wild: natural, different, special experience

Suggestions for providing enjoyable, minimal-impact experiences:

- Video cameras can allow tourists to view animals in sensitive or remote areas [note: t a previous WTA workshop it was suggested that outback hotels could show what is happening at neighbouring waterholes while guests are having breakfast]
- Cameras can also show what was there at different times (e.g. see nocturnal devil photos/videos during the following daytime)
- Good interpretation while watching wildlife can make it exciting for adrenalin-seekers without actual action or close contact
- Immersive zoo experiences can give the feeling of being in the animal's habitat and watching natural behaviour
- If animals are fed and given enrichment during opening hours each day, this is good for both the animals and the visitors
- Virtual reality for thrill seekers , e.g., in the trees with fruitbats as suggested above [note: from subsequent discussions: "up close and personal" with wild crocodiles while watching real ones from afar, and an interactive app could show what happens if you do the wrong thing, such as getting to close to a croc-inhabited river]
- Visual barriers so people can still see the animals (e.g. nest-boxes at Penguins)
- Another use of virtual reality is to educate children and others early, including in schools, before they encounter animals.
- Educational games can also provide a fun learning experience, engaging children early, and linking the people with the conservation message.
- Emotive videos can be shown on planes entering the country to show people the delights of viewing wildlife but also the potential negative impacts of inappropriate behaviour [note: Melissa Geise's video on visitor impacts on penguins, shown *en route* to Antarctica is a good example]
- Physical contact may be needed as well to promote an emotional bond and to raise awareness of animals as sentient beings: feeding seagulls, playing with crickets, traditional outdoor nature studies
- Aboriginal communities could be increasingly involved in conservation programs
- Bottom-up conservation practices can lead to collaborative efforts
- Incentives for individual tour guides could include awards: e.g. for providing the best educational experience between people and wildlife.
- Cruise boats could include
 - extra payment for nature
 - compulsory talks as passengers leave the hip and enter wildlife habitat
- Conservation messages can be provided for each animal [note: or at least groups of animals if too many species are seen on a tour to talk about every one separately]
- Viable corridors should be planned by local councils for various species [note: as in a discussion at a previous WTA conference if this involves species that could damage crops or attack domestic animals, this may need to involve good fences that allow adequate wildlife movement between habitats without upsetting local landowners]
- Natural spaces can be created in safe areas so not attracting wildlife to roads
- Make roads safe for wildlife collision black spots – overpasses, underpasses, appropriate fencing to channel animals to safe crossings, education of motorists, enforcement of speed limits etc.
- If animals are fed and given enrichment during opening hours each day, this is good for both the animals and the visitors
- Encourage operators to set up citizen science projects within their facilities and share records
- Encourage local residents (including politicians) to see wildlife as a valuable resource

What are some good examples already happening?

We are sure there are many other good examples, but the only two specifically mentioned here were:

- Tiger Trek- Taronga
- Palm oil initiative - Taronga and Melbourne Zoo

How do we ban or phase out bad practices local residents may depend on, especially in regional or poverty areas?

When setting this question we had in mind such issues as some mahouts and even elephants in Asia who would be badly disadvantaged if some elephant tourism was abruptly banned rather than phased out, people who rely on selling inappropriate foods to tourists to feed wild birds, fish or monkeys, hunting permits that assist in funding conservation efforts etc., also lethal methods of control by locals (both legal and illegal) of animals that tourists want to see but which damage crops, food supplies and livestock. How do we best plan on phasing these out and replacing them with better practices? These issues did not really get discussed, possibly due to lack of time, so we'll try to address them in a future event.

Points that were raised were:

- Certification of tour guides will encourage good practice
- Different sensitivities of different species should be pointed out for each area (to guides, and from there to their visitors)
- Education and retraining of locals is important, involving the community
- The best practice facilities can be reviewed on social media sites, also bad experiences, and the general media can be alerted to these

How do we educate tourists and tourism agencies to avoid cruel or environmentally-damaging operations without disadvantaging others that have superficial similarities but doing good work?

Suggestions included:

- Tour operators and guides should have at least a minimum knowledge of wildlife and best-practice tourism through courses, manuals etc. Written and practical tests could be made mandatory for permits. WTA could lead the way here.
- More tour operators need to be eco-certified
- Social media messages could regularly include:
 - look, don't touch (unless with expert guide in appropriate situation)
 - China [note: not sure of the exact suggestion here]
 - Positive ways of getting messages across
 - Some zoos are ok but not all
 - sharing of experiences both good and bad
- Politicians and tourist societies should be kept informed

Final discussion

How do we best distribute current knowledge to

- **the tourism industry,**
- **conservation managers, and**
- **governments (all levels)?**

Most of the discussion seemed to answer all three questions at once, although a few were more specific

Suggestions included:

- Social media
 - FB pages, FB groups , #tags
 - FB group for members/delegates
 - Twitter, instagram
- Graphic banners under emails
- Report from this conference (and other events)
- Videos for operators to show tourists in various languages
- Short videos with key messages to governments etc .
- Links to relevant sites with quality information
- Hosting follow-up local (informal) forums after conferences such as this one
- Invite speakers from the conference to visit elsewhere and to contribute to blogs
- Webinars
- Other language presenters, to train international guides
- WTA to provide education to universities, businesses etc. including case studies and field trips (and they could charge for this)
- Press releases – government and general, with photos (e.g. Cradle Mountain, sniffer dogs)
- National Parks – look for relevant points amongst discussions and presentations to pass on to NPs
- Local government
 - send information *via* email to environment and tourism committees within council
 - ministers [note: not sure the intent of this one - cc to ministers?]
 - offer to give presentations to council
 - consortium of councils – present issues before these events

What are some important knowledge gaps we need our researchers to address?

- Minimising stress levels
- Maximising positive interactions
- Tourism expectations
 - what will bring businesses
 - what will promote realistic expectations
- How to market less visited areas, spread the load, get tourists into regional areas
- Are our conservation messages working?
- How to minimise Health and Safety problems
- Communicating with other cultures (more than just a language issue) – presentation styles etc.

It was also suggested that WTA and universities could team up for joint research

Unfortunately we seemed to run out of time for our final discussion questions

- How might we communicate this to researchers, including prospective post-grad students?
- Who might we approach to support their applications for research grants?
- Is there a general message or two from this conference we can submit as a press release?