Protected area tourism partnerships: what makes them tick?

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Partnerships between tourism enterprises and protected area managers are widely promoted as means to generate mutually beneficial outcomes. This paper reports on a study that examined the effectiveness of twenty-one tourism partnerships associated with protected areas across Australia. Quantitative and qualitative surveys of partnership participants were used to identify the most important features of the partnerships and analyse the relationships between these features and outcomes for participants, as well as for sustainability more generally. Important outcomes for the partners included economic gains for protected areas and tourism businesses; improved availability of information; improved relationships; adoption of innovative approaches to problems-solving; and reduced conflict between partners. Important sustainability outcomes included improved understanding of the values of protected areas; improved biodiversity conservation; greater respect for culture, heritage and traditions; increased engagement of local communities in tourism; and increased local social and economic benefits. Partnership-related features that influenced these outcomes included open communication; inclusive participation; partners’ commitment; adaptability to changing circumstances; leadership by at least one of the partners; agreement on the purpose and direction of the partnership; identification and allocation of partners’ roles and powers; agreements and regulations supporting the partnership and tourism in protected areas; sufficient resources; and an understanding other partners’ viewpoints. These results are used to characterise and identify the requirements for successful protected area tourism partnerships.

Partnerships are widely regarded as a key strategy for sustainable protected area tourism (Buckley & Sommer 2001, Eagles et al. 2002). The partnership approach is a hallmark of a new paradigm for protected areas which seeks to encourage more involvement of the private sector and local communities. Partnerships can be a vehicle for mobilising resources and expertise, leading to efficiency and productivity gains (De Lacy et al. 2002). They can support change management (Rosenau, 2000), stimulate innovation (Tremblay 2000), moderate power inequalities (Leach & Pelkey 2001), boost conservation initiatives (Stubbs et al. 2005), foster collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution (De Lacy et al. 2002), help coordination and improve understanding (Davidson & Lockwood 2008). However, partnerships can also be exclusionary, favour established interests (Rhodes 1997), compromise public accountability, and threaten public values and the capacity of governments to govern (Davidson & Lockwood 2008).

It is important therefore to understand the factors that (i) promote successful tourism protected area partnerships (that is, those that yield the types of benefits indicated above); and (ii) counteract potential concerns with the partnership approach. While previous studies have
addressed these matters, many (for example, Augustyn & Knowles 2000) examined one or two cases, so that the wider applicability of the findings is uncertain; others such as Buckley and Sommer (2001) integrated findings from previous studies so that a consistent experimental and analytical frame is lacking; and many are not theoretically informed, thereby limiting the understandings that can be generated. There has also been little previous consideration of ineffective or failed partnerships.

We conducted research that addressed these limitations by (i) identifying an appropriate theoretical frame for analysing tourism partnerships; (ii) undertaking mixed-method surveys of 21 protected area-focussed tourism partnerships; and (iii) integrating theoretical understandings with the empirical data to offer general insights into the constitution of successful partnerships and the conditions needed to bring these about. This paper primarily concentrates on the second of these components, but also offers general guidance on the factors that underpin successful protected area tourism partnerships.

The 21 study partnerships were drawn from all Australian state and territory jurisdictions, included terrestrial and marine areas, and incorporated successful and unsuccessful partnerships. The majority were between a protected area agency and a business operator, and had been in operation since the late 1990s. Most were formal, although for several of these the actual partnership extended beyond the formally-identified partners.

A survey containing predominantly quantitative questions (many employing Likert scales) was administered to 100 participants from the 21 partnerships. Survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations and factor analyses (the latter not reported here). Follow-up interviews were conducted with these participants to explore issues in more depth. Content analysis was undertaken on the interview data, with a theoretically informed inductive approach used to categorise responses into 19 classes, each representing a distinct conceptual domain. The results presented here integrate the main findings from both the survey and interviews, with emphasis given to the most important features of the partnerships, and the relationships between these features and partnership outcomes. Mean values given for survey items measured on Likert scales have a maximum possible score of 5.

On average, respondents had an overwhelmingly positive view of the partnerships, with most considering them to be fairly’ or very’ inclusive, collaborative, communicative, fair, sincere, flexible and effective. Important outcomes included economic gains for protected areas and tourism businesses; improved information availability; improved relationships; adoption of innovative approaches to problems-solving; and reduced conflict between partners. Important sustainability outcomes included improved understanding of protected area values; improved biodiversity conservation; greater respect for cultural heritage; increased local community engagement; and increased local social and economic benefits. Nonetheless, a small number of partnerships were considered restricted in terms of opportunities for participation, suffered from communication problems, and were rigid and ineffective. Eleven domains were particularly influential in relation to these outcomes.

Communication (engagement mechanisms between partners, consultation with outside parties, education and marketing) was the domain most frequently raised by interview participants in relation to partnership success, a finding that was also evident in the survey data, with open communication between partners’ rated the most important aspect of working together (mean
Conversely, inadequate communication was the most frequently identified source of partnership failure. Inclusion (involvement of partners and stakeholders in processes, decisions and actions) was frequently raised by interview participants as a vital element in partnership success. Again, inadequate inclusion was identified as a major source of partnership failure. Important characteristics of successful partnerships included direct involvement of decision-makers, active participation by all partners, and effective mechanisms to engage stakeholders. Participation by all partners was correlated with improved understanding of other partners’ interests and reduced conflicts between partners. The direct involvement of decision-makers appeared influential in achieving the purpose of partnership, positive economic outcomes, and strengthening of organisational and business capacity.

Commitment (personnel and time invested by partners, non-resource-based organisational support) was identified as important for partnership success in both the interviews and survey, where the support provided by a protected area agency (mean 4.45) and adequate organisational support (mean 4.34) were highly rated. Achievement of partnership purposes including generation of benefits for all partners, stimulation of innovative approaches, improved access to funding, new relationships with influential people or organisations, and improved understanding of other partners’ interests were all correlated with partners’ commitment. The adequacy of organisational support was also correlated with the first four of these outcomes, as well as strengthening of organisational and business capacity and improved biodiversity conservation.

Adaptability (flexibility, innovation and risk management) was an important characteristic of successful partnerships, with achievement of partnership purposes correlated with willingness by partners to adapt to changing situations. Stimulation of innovative approaches and reduced conflict between partners were correlated with flexible decision-making.

Leadership by at least one of the partners was identified as a success factor, particularly in the survey where it was the fourth highest rated item (mean 4.37). Correlation tests suggested that leadership was an important in achieving the purpose of partnership, economic gain by the tourism industry, stimulation of innovative approaches, strengthening of organisational and business capacity and improved understanding of other partners’ interests.

Direction (visions, objectives, shared purpose) was frequently raised by interview participants as a success factor, and inadequacies in this regard were an important source of partnership failure. Working together on an agreed purpose was highly rated in the survey (mean 4.40). Agreement by partners on the problems being addressed by the partnership was correlated with achieving the purposes of the partnership.

Roles and powers (distribution of power, allocation and acceptance of roles) was a domain frequently raised by interview participants. The survey also indicated that identification and allocation of partners’ roles and powers, and efforts towards power sharing, were important in achieving partnership purposes. Enhancement of culture and heritage, improved biodiversity conservation and improved understanding of protected area values, as well as achieving the purpose of partnership, strengthening of organisational and business capacity and reduced conflicts between partners, were correlated with shared accountability for decisions and actions.
Processes (administrative arrangements, business processes, decision-making and planning procedures, conflict resolution processes) were frequently identified as important by interview participants, and such features also rated highly in the survey, with means above 4.2 for problems addressed by the partnership as they occur, conflict managed as it arises, fair decision-making and supportive administrative arrangements. The importance of administrative arrangements providing support for protected area tourism is emphasised by correlations with stimulation of innovative approaches, improved understanding of other partners’ interests, improved access to funding, enhancement of culture and heritage, improved biodiversity conservation outcomes, and improved understanding of protected area values.

Regulations and agreements (legislation, formal partnership agreements) were identified in both the survey and interviews as important for partnership success, while deficiencies in such matters were a source of partnership failure. An important characteristic of successful partnerships was a written agreement, while influential aspects of the working environment included legislation supporting protected area tourism.

Resources (finance, infrastructure, staff) were a frequently identified success factor by interviewees, and finance was also one of the most influential aspects of the working environment identified in the survey (mean 4.27). Resource inadequacies were identified as a major source of partnership failure. Support provided by the protected area agency (mean 4.45) was also a significant factor in meeting partnership purposes.

Understanding (partner’s awareness of what is required to achieve outcomes, appreciation of another partner’s or stakeholder’s viewpoint or values) was another of the domains frequently raised by interview participants, particularly in relation to sustainability outcomes. Survey participants also rated the level of understanding that partners had of each other as an important element of partnership success (mean 4.46).

The results of this research demonstrate that successful partnerships for protected area tourism give a high priority to effective communication and inclusive engagement with partners, as well as associated stakeholders and communities. Understanding of and respect for each other’s values, aspirations and operational modes is crucial. Partners must commit substantial energy, time and resources, and work together in a mutually agreed direction, while also allowing for flexibility and adaptation. Strongly developed administrative and decision-making processes, supportive regulations and agreements that clearly identify the roles and associated powers of each partner, and acceptance of these by both partners and stakeholders, are essential. Delivery of all these requirements demands sustained leadership by one or more of the partners.


