ABSTRACT

Nature based tourism is booming, the sector is of great importance and thus the management of protected areas is facing a dilemma: protection versus visitor use. The different objectives of public policies with respect to tourism and therefore protected area managers and tour operators result in misunderstandings and sometimes animosity, which does not serve the interests of either. Given the engagement of both in protected areas and necessarily with each other, it is critical that their relationship and its complexities are clearly understood. As such, this study explores the relationship and associated influences between protected area managers and tour operators. The analysis was theoretically informed by social representation theory and recent approaches to cultural mapping. The insights provided by this study will assist in moving the current rhetoric associated with managers and tour operators beyond partnerships and collaboration.

Keywords: protected areas; public policy; relationships; tour operator; managers; cultural mapping

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Australia’s natural settings and cultural traditions frequently influence visitors’ decisions when choosing Australia as a holiday destination. Nature based tourism is growing rapidly throughout Australia. Tourism to protected areas can be expected to show even further growth and with increasing tourist numbers the problem then becomes one of managing tourism in protected areas to protect and maintain the values that attracted tourists in the first place. The growing demand for nature based tourism opportunities is leading to increased pressure on the environment and it will have a negative impact on the resource upon which it is based if not properly managed. These developments have led to a shift with protected area management agencies becoming providers of recreational services (Buckley and Sommer, 2001a). Little is known about the perceptions protected area managers and members of the tourism industry have of each other, the industry and protected areas. To work successfully and effectively with tourism, protected area managers must understand how an individual’s background can cause them to hold certain views and how they react (Worboys, et al., 2005).
The important underlying issue is to gain an understanding of the broader policy context of the government agencies responsible for protected areas and tourism in Western Australia (tier one followed by how well managers and tour operators are able to work together (tier two). This is followed by consideration of how the diversity of staff within protected area agencies engage with and support tourism priorities and works with each other i.e. intra-agency differences (tier three). Their working relationship strongly influences the quality of the tourism product, the satisfaction of visitors and the protection of the natural resource base on which the industry depends. It has been recognised that protected area managers are facing the dilemma of conservation versus recreation (Buckley, 2000a; Cole, 2001). The allocation of financial resources and the question of priorities and perspective with respect to protected areas put additional strain on the task of management. Protected area managers are concerned that an increase in tourism within protected areas might threaten conservation aspects of the area. They face a fundamental conflict between providing access or ensuring protection (Bramwell and Lane, 2000; Buckley, 2000b; Buckley and Sommer, 2001a; Cole, 2001; Cole and Hammitt, 2000; DITR, 2003; Eagles, 2002; Worboys, et al., 2005). However, at the same time park managers’ budgets are restricted so that they need funds from tourism to contribute to operating costs (Buckley and Sommer, 2001a). Tourism and leisure activities in protected areas can provide financial resources for environmental conservation and management. It may be assumed that protected areas which attract more visitors are likely to gain greater political profiles and, hence, receive more government grants (Eagles, 2002). An associated concern is that financial imperatives may reduce the ability of managers to manage for conservation if tourism becomes a higher priority than conservation.

Presently, in Australia it is recognised that the management priority for managing protected areas is conservation over recreation (Buckley and Sommer, 2001a; DITR, 2003). Literature on protected area management highlights the difficulties in managing protected areas, as various influences need to be considered. To effectively manage protected areas it is necessary to consider the political and legal system, internal organisational structures, and the broad social and political structure of the society (Worboys, et al., 2005). Nevertheless, some authors consider tourism as an appropriate use of protected areas that can be a significant source of revenue (Buckley and Sommer, 2001a; DITR, 2003; Eagles, et al., 2002; Worboys, et al., 2005). But there is also public resistance to increased dependence on income through tourism. This resistance is based upon the philosophical notion that nature is free, universally owned and visiting protected areas should be free of charge.

**METHODS**

The aim of this project is to inform public policy and strategies for facilitating the relationship between protected area managers and tour operators. One aspect of reaching this objective was to fully understand the relationship as seen by the two sectors.

For example, we wanted to find out ‘what’ protected area managers and tour operators think works well with their current working arrangements and ‘what’ are their expectation of each other. Gaining an in-depth understanding and to be able to fully explain participants’ views and perceptions, was identified as the first objective of this research. We used a qualitative interviewing technique, including the drawing of a socio-gram by each respondent. Respondents were selected from specific representative regions and parks in WA with the aim of selecting information-rich respondents with extensive experience in managing or working in protected areas. Thus, the purpose is to conceptualise the relationship to then inform public policy, information dissemination techniques (communication) and educational objectives for protected area managers and tour operators.
KEY FINDINGS

Communication and the balance of power were highlighted as the most pronounced concepts in working in protected areas. The importance of communication was recognised as a vital attribute in working in protected areas and good communication skills were identified as being essential when asked how a good protected area manager or tour operator should be. The vast majority of respondents stated communication as being very important and necessary for a good working relationship.

With ongoing communication a knowledge base can be established and most likely knowledge and information will be exchanged to achieve and sustain a similar level of knowledge by protected area managers and tour operators. As information and knowledge is exchanged it becomes part of a shared knowledge base which in turn is necessary for problem solving that is owned and understood by participating parties (Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000). Feeding into the concept of communication and to determine the level and direction of connections between managers and operators, respondents were asked to draw a sociogram with themselves and all others working in or managing protected areas they could think of including their connections. The analysis of the respondents sociograms were theoretically informed through social representation theory (Joffe, 2003; Murray, 2002; Parales Quenza, 2005; Stangor, 2004; Wagner, et al., 1999). The mapping technique allowed us to determine the way of existing connections, one way versus two ways, and the placement of the individual respondent. The mapping method has established an order for connections. Interestingly here, some manager placed themselves in the middle of the picture/drawing surrounded by all the other players, whereas operators draw the sociogram using hierarchical representation in which they consider CALM, the protected area management agency, together with local government, at the peak of the structure.

To fully understand the importance of the sociograms and interviews, the concept of power and tourism policy needs to be considered. In a setting such as protected areas, and having different values and ideologies, it is vital to determine what these different values and ideologies are. Values and ideologies play an essential part in legitimising, defining and identifying particular attitudes on which public policies are based (Hall and Jenkins, 1995). They form the core of policies and the behaviour of individuals within the working arena. The interactions of managers and operators are informed by their different values and ideological positions. This can result in conflicts, an aspect of which is a power struggle.

Power plays an important part in protected area management, through the exercise of power dominance of one set of values is gained over the other (Hall, 1994). In the political arena, the protection agency has the legal mandate to manage and protect these areas. Having regulatory powers for protected areas in Western Australia and a different set of values and ideologies, the interplay between managers and operators creates demands that lead to conflicts. These conflicts are often evident in direct encounters. This research determined the connection between power, structure, perspectives and values among protected area managers and tour operators working in protected areas. The power struggle between individuals, managers and operators in the field, has to be considered in a particular political context. To be able to fully understand the basis for this struggle, policy conflicts between government agencies with respect to conservation and tourism are an inherent aspect of the situation and need to be viewed from a public policy perspective. In Western Australia, the Department of Conservation and Land Management and Tourism WA have different policy goals based on their Acts of Parliament. Even though this research focuses on the analysis and understanding of the arising conflicts between managers and operators, it has to be seen in a wider policy context. This analysis will form the next stage of the project.
REFERENCES


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