
http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/22387/
Benefits that matter to managers: An exploratory study of three national park management agencies

Dr Brent D. Moyle*
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Centre for Tourism Leisure and Work
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management
Southern Cross University

Professor Betty Weiler
Research Professor
Centre for Tourism Leisure and Work
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management
Southern Cross University

Professor Susan A. Moore
Leader Nature Based Tourism Research Group
School of Veterinary and Life Sciences
Murdoch University

* Corresponding author, Brent Moyle, Centre for Tourism Leisure and Work, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management, Southern Cross University, Locked Mail Bag 4, Coolangatta Qld 4225, Phone: +61 3 5589 3153, E-mail: brent.moyle@scu.edu.au
Benefits that matter to managers: An exploratory study of three national park management agencies

Abstract
Understanding and conveying the benefits of providing visitor experiences in national parks is critical for their survival, but to date has received relatively little attention. This paper uses a series of semi-structured interviews and an online survey with senior/executive managers from three Australian parks agencies, as well as an analysis of corporate and strategic documents, to identify each agency’s strategic focus with respect to benefits associated with the provision of visitor experiences. Results reveal 39 personal and community-wide benefits that mattered for managers across the three Australian parks agencies. Key benefits identified by senior/executive level managers included accessing natural experiences, connecting with nature, and appreciating scenic beauty and the protection of biological diversity. These findings can help inform communication designed to reposition national parks, which is critical if agencies are to remain viable as providers of recreation and leisure experiences in the 21st century.

Keywords: communication, national park, benefit, manager, visitor, community

Acknowledgements:
This research was funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage project number: LP100200014. The authors would like to thank Dr Isabelle Wolf, Dr Amanda Smith, Dr Kelly Hunt de Bie, Mr Dino Zanon and Dr Ingrid Sieler for their input into the research. Finally, the authors would also like to acknowledge the senior managers from three participating parks agencies who generously gave up their time to participate in this research.
Benefits that matter to managers: An exploratory study of three national park management agencies

Background and introduction

National parks offer a wide variety of benefits to visitors, surrounding communities, and society in general (Nash, 1982). As such the benefits of parks to visitors and communities emerged as a prominent research topic in the 1970s (see Driver and Tocher, 1970). Although the benefits of providing visitor experiences in parks have been explored by many authors, arguably they are still poorly understood (Manning, 2011). This lack of understanding has been primarily attributed to issues with measurement and definitive linking of park visitation with outcomes or benefits (Godbey & Mowen, 2011). This paper argues that the acute lack of understanding of managers’ perceptions of benefits, which benefits are salient, and which benefits they most desire to project is also problematic. All the same, it is widely accepted that benefits occur as a result of visiting parks, both to the visitor and to society generally (Crompton, 2008).

Even though the benefits of leisure and recreation in parks have been established, pressures such as the global economic crisis and climate change have put vital visitor infrastructure (both human resources and facilities) for achieving these benefits under increasing threat (Weiler, Moore and Moyle, 2013). This threat is due not only to demand for renewable and non-renewable resources perceived as being tied up in national parks, but also due to competition from other government departments such as health and education for limited taxpayer funds (Crompton 2008) and from other leisure and recreation providers such as wildlife parks and aquaria. Compounding this issue even within park agencies themselves, monetary and human resources that previously supported the provision of leisure and recreation opportunities in parks are being diverted to purposes such as fire, flood and other
natural resource management activities. As a result, experiences in parks and thus the benefits afforded by these experiences are under threat.

Consequently, a better understanding of the benefits that national park management agencies desire to project and communicate to the community is important and timely, so that funding bodies, taxpayers, other government agencies, visitors, communities, and park agencies themselves, continue to support recreation and leisure in national parks. As such, this paper aims to identify the salient benefits that three national park management agencies desire to project and which of these benefits are perceived as particularly important by senior/executive managers. This analysis also presents a valuable opportunity to assess which benefits conceptualised in the literature and identified as salient by senior/executive managers feature in key strategic planning documents of these agencies. By achieving this aim, the paper provides information that can be used by parks agencies to establish and defend their importance and position as providers of recreation and leisure experiences, which is vital if they are to remain sustainable and viable in the 21st century.

**Literature review**

For as long as there have been national parks, land managers across the globe have faced the complex challenge of balancing the need to conserve the natural environment with the desire to provide recreation opportunities for visitors (Runte, 1987). As competition for resources escalates, the allocation of limited resources to build visitor facilities and infrastructure and to provide services for recreational experiences in parks becomes more contentious. It is partly for this reason that, before expanding recreational opportunities, activities and settings, it is in the interests of park managers to identify and measure the benefits that can accrue from such opportunities (Stein and Lee 1995).
Benefits are desirable or advantageous conditions realised by individuals, economies, societies, or the environment (Driver et al. 1987) but, because they are difficult to measure, most of the research on leisure and recreation in parks has focused on visitor motivations or experiences (Manning 2011). Nonetheless, the benefits individuals can attain from visiting parks have been extensively conceptualised within the literature (Driver 2008). According to Manning (2011), there is a series of personal and community-wide benefits that emerges from the provision of satisfying experiences in parks (Manning 2011). Understanding these benefits is fundamental to decision-making about the provision of visitor services and facilities and thus to park management. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of the benefits literature that underpins this approach to visitor management and the conceptual basis for the present study.

Benefits based management (BBM), or the Benefits Approach to Leisure (BOAL), suggests that if visitors participate in particular activities in appropriate settings they will not only achieve their desired recreation experience, but also accrue a series of benefits, on-site and off-site as well as short-term and long-term (Weber and Anderson 2010). BBM involves identifying and defining explicit target benefits (outcomes) which could potentially lead to beneficial consequences for the individual or for society. Of particular relevance to the present paper, BBM also enables managers to capture the outcomes or benefits that a park agency needs to project or convey to its constituent publics as part of sustaining visitor experiences in national parks.

Using the BBM approach, park managers can specify the benefits they wish to provide, design facilities and services around these benefits, select appropriate settings for specific activities, and measure the extent to which benefits have been realised (Allen and McGovern 1997). Earlier versions of the model were criticised for a narrow focus, with key benefit items identified as being difficult to measure and manage (Manning, 2011). As a
result, the existing definitions within the framework were expanded to add the realisation of satisfying experiences as a benefit in and of itself (Manning, 2011). This has led to a slight shift in focus for the BBM movement, to outcomes focused management (OFM).

OFM typically segments the benefits of parks into a number of different categories, including physical, psychological, social/cultural, environmental, and economic benefits (Driver 2008; Manning 2011). The psycho-physiological health benefits of exercise have been topical, partly due to the rising cost of healthcare, with many countries around the world realising the fundamental importance of preventative health measures (Godbey and Mowen 2011). As a consequence, the health benefits of regular exercise through physical activity, including in parks, are now better understood (Maller et al. 2009), with opportunities ranging from low through to moderate and vigorous levels of activity (Godbey et al. 2005).

Some of the most frequently cited physical health benefits in the literature include reducing risks such as heart attacks, lowering cholesterol, building cardiovascular fitness, maintaining healthy bones and muscles, and improving overall quality of life (Maller et al. 2006). Evidence suggests that these benefits are associated with multiple and frequent visits to parks (Frost and Hall, 2009), proximity to parks (Stodolska et al. 2011) long-term participation (Henderson et al. 2001), and engagement with outdoor activities (Godbey and Mowen 2011).

In addition to the physical benefits, there are numerous psychological health benefits for park visitors that arise from interacting with the natural environment (Hartig et al. 2001). Research has focused on the role of park-based leisure in improving moods, reducing perceived stress, enhancing a sense of wellness, and reducing risks of depression and other associated mental health disorders (LaPage, 2005; Hussain et al. 2010; Orsega-Smith et al. 2004). Other studies have found that leisure and recreation in parks leads to a variety of psychological health benefits including a more holistic sense of wellness, increased perceived
quality of life, greater self-confidence, and improved problem solving (Rosenberger et al. 2009). Furthermore, the restorative effects of being in nature have been widely documented, presenting the opportunity to achieve spiritual-type benefits from park-based leisure and recreation (Frumkin, 2003).

A number of social, economic, and environmental benefits of visiting parks have been widely documented (Manning 2011). Important social benefits linked to parks include strengthening family networks, providing places for youth to participate in activities, maintaining community cohesion and pride, and building social capital (Hung and Crompton 2006). Visitor experiences in parks provide economic benefits, including an increase in business and tourism investment into regions, as well as potential reductions in the cost of long-term healthcare for governments (Maller et al. 2009; Stynes 2005). Thus, there are also a plethora of social, economic, and environmental benefits of providing visitor experiences in national parks which extend well beyond the visitor, well beyond park boundaries, and into society much more broadly.

Collectively the research into the benefits of visiting parks provides a conceptual lens with which to undertake the present study. However, while there is a substantial body of knowledge on the benefits that can be derived from an experience in a national park, there has been a lack of research exploring the benefits that national park management agencies desire to project to visitors and society in general. This is particularly topical at the present time due to at least three factors. Firstly, the global economic crisis puts considerable pressure on government bodies, including park management agencies, to justify expenditures, in order to avoid national parks falling victim to government cut-backs (Moyle and Croy 2009). Secondly, considerably more park management resources need to be allocated to respond to extreme weather conditions associated with climate change and the resultant damage to landscapes, habitats, and park infrastructure (Scott et al. 2002). Thirdly, there are a
greater and more diverse range of recreation providers and competing opportunities for recreation both within and outside the public sector, threatening national park management agencies’ position as providers of recreation experiences (Weiler et al., 2013).

This market position refers to the place that a park agency occupies in the minds of its constituent publics, relative to their perception of other services that are competing for public tax dollars (Crompton 2009) and for their leisure and recreation business. For example, zoos ‘compete’ with national parks for visitors, and their loyalty and money. Positioning is the process of establishing and maintaining a distinctive and valued place in the minds of the general public and elected officials, whereas repositioning is a deliberate set of actions designed to change an agency’s existing position (Crompton 1993). Park agencies need to have a clear understanding of which benefits they desire to project and then be pro-active in communicating these benefits, in order to position themselves as providers of outdoor recreation experiences.

With a comprehensive understanding of desired and perceived benefits, a park agency can reduce its vulnerability to the factors that threaten park agencies and national parks themselves. However, research to date has been dominated by benefits as perceived by visitors and surrounding communities, mostly at a case study (single park) level. There has been limited research focused on the benefits that park agencies and managers desire to project for their organisation as a whole for the lands and other natural resources they manage. To help maintain and enhance a positive public image of the benefits of visiting parks, this research aims to identify the salient benefits that three national park management agencies desire to project to visitors and the broader community, to determine the relative prominence of these benefits in strategic communication by these agencies, and to assess the relative importance of each benefit with respect to managers’ desire to project it to its constituent publics.
Method

National parks occupy 5.2% of Australia’s land area (Newsome et al. 2013), with significant resourcing committed to their management. In Australia, national parks and protected areas generally are managed by state-based agencies, in contrast to countries such as the United States where parks are managed at the national level. As a loose federation of states, Australia relies heavily on individualised state-based legislation for environmental management, including the management of its national parks. There are however widespread commonalities between the states in how they approach this task. All states can declare and protect national parks through legislation, all require management plans prepared by the park management agencies as a basis for management, all identify recreation and tourism as an important use of parks, and all require a level of public engagement in such planning.

Three state-based park management agencies from Australia were selected as case studies, Parks Victoria (PV), the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC) and the Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) to provide a diversity of views and insights into the benefits desired to be projected and their relative importance to senior/executive managers. The Department of Environment and Conservation has recently been restructured and renamed the Department of Parks and Wildlife. However for the purpose of this manuscript the former name of DEC will be applied. Choosing three agencies with similar (but not identical) policy settings and management practices, and where each is responsible for many parks, and analysing their desired projected benefits provides a valuable contribution to the literature, given that previous studies have generally focused on only one park and on visitors’ rather than managers’ perceptions.

PV is the largest public manager of tourism assets in Australia, attracting almost 43 million visits a year to the state of Victoria (VIC) including to 45 national parks, and with an
additional 30 million visits to piers and jetties across 1,400 visitor sites (PV 2010). DEC in Western Australia (WA) manages land covering over 26 million hectares including 26 of Australia’s 80 bioregions, with a visitation rate of around 16 million visitors per annum (DEC 2013). The OEH in New South Wales (NSW) is responsible for managing 882 parks, spread across 7 million hectares, representing 9% of the total land area of NSW (Office of Environment and Heritage 2010).

Three sequential stages of research were used to assess each agency’s strategic focus with respect to projection of the benefits of providing visitor experiences in national parks. The first stage involved semi-structured interviews with 27 senior/executive managers from the three national park management agencies. Each was selected, based on their experience and the position they held, as individuals who could speak with some authority about the benefits of providing recreation experiences in parks, particularly in the current economic and environmental climate. The second stage included a content analysis of 15 key corporate and strategic documents (five from each agency), identified by senior/executive managers as capturing the benefits of parks that their agency seeks to project. The third stage involved a self-completed on-line survey that was administered to 19 senior/executive managers who were identified as being in positions of influence in the provision and projection of benefits in the three agencies. These three data collection procedures and corresponding data analysis procedures are outlined below.

In Stage 1, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with senior/executive managers from PV, DEC and OEH. Interviews were designed to capture the range of benefits that each agency seeks to project to visitors and the broader community. The interviews had three key parts. The first part obtained a background to the interviewees. The second part focused on exploring senior/executive managers’ perceptions of the benefits of visiting parks that each agency desires to project, including a focus on personal (experiential and higher-
order) benefits and broader community (societal) benefits. The third and final part of the interview identified corporate and strategic documents that should be included in Stage 2.

Senior/executive managers in each agency were approached via email, with an information sheet and consent form attached, and invited to participate in the research. Of the 33 senior/executive managers who were invited to be interviewed, 27 accepted the invitation, nine from each agency. Face-to-face interviews of between 30 and 60 minutes were conducted at the park agencies between August 2011 and March 2012. Interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and then analysed using NVivo 9, which is a software program commonly used to analyse qualitative data (Wang, et al., 2014).

Huberman and Miles’ (2002) three-step approach of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification was utilised to enhance the reliability and validity of the results. The data reduction phase involved coding the interview transcripts using codes that best reflected emergent patterns and expected theoretical themes from the data. The conclusion drawing/verification stage ensured two of the authors independently checked the initial themes, with some refinement following. Finally, an additional independent coder, with no previous involvement in the study, coded the data. An inter-coder reliability score of over 90% was achieved, which is above the recommended reliability level (Huberman and Miles 2002).

OFM was used as the theoretical lens to analyse and present the results of the interviews with park managers. As outlined earlier, OFM identifies four different types of benefits: personal, economic, environmental, and socio-cultural (Manning 2009). The personal benefits (the benefits that a visitor gains from visiting a park) were classified into two groups based on the OFM framework: (1) Personal (experiential) benefits: the realisation of satisfying experiences (for example, socialising with family and friends), and (2) Personal (higher-order) benefits, including improvements to and the maintenance of desirable personal
conditions (for example, mental health benefits) as well as the prevention of undesirable conditions (for example, reduced stress and anxiety). The remaining benefits types – economic, environmental and socio-cultural – are the benefits that accrue to the broader community or to society as a result of park visitation (for example, a healthier society). These are grouped together and reported as (3) Society benefits in the results section that follows.

In Stage 2, corporate and strategic planning documents reflective of the park agency’s visitor and community policies were selected for each of the three agencies included in the study. A subset of 15 key documents, five for each agency, were identified in the interviews with senior/executive managers and then sourced from park agencies’ websites. All of the documents sourced were from the 2011/2012 calendar year. The documents were then downloaded as PDF documents and scrutinised to ensure that they were in-scope, that is, that they made some reference to community, tourism, or visitor benefits.

The documents were content analysed, a method commonly applied in studies relating to tourism and visitor planning (Ruhanen et al. 2012). To facilitate automatic and rapid coding of textual documents, the documents were loaded into Leximancer v.4, a data mining tool. Leximancer is a content analysis software program that has previously been employed in tourism and visitor research (Scott and Smith 2005) which helps increase reliability and validity, and reduces bias and coding error in the content analysis process (Alexa and Zuell 2000). While concepts and themes are emergent, Leximancer allows for theory-driven, directed searches of the documents (referred to as ‘user-defined concepts’) to explore instances of particular concepts and themes. The content analysis used the benefits items that emerged from the interviews with senior/executive managers as user-defined concepts. These were then categorised into primary and secondary benefits depending on the frequency of each benefit item in the corporate and strategic documents.
In Stage 3, the benefit items identified from the Stage 1 interviews with senior/executive managers, the content analysis and from previous studies on the benefits of parks were used to create the survey instruments. A process of consultation was conducted with each park management agency to ensure the list included in the survey was both comprehensive and reflective of the suite of potential benefits each agency desired to project to the community. This process resulted in a total of 39 items being included in the instrument sent out to park executives and directors. Items were split into 3 categories reflecting the multiple layers of park benefits stipulated in the OFM framework: personal experiential benefits (12 items), personal higher-order benefits (12 items) and societal/community-wide benefits (15 items). Senior/executive managers were asked to indicate their level of agreement regarding the agency’s desire to project each benefit. Items were measured on 7 point Likert-type scales from ‘Very Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Very Strongly Agree’. A total of 19 (out of a possible 21) senior/executive managers completed the survey across the three agencies. The mean scores for each benefit item were calculated and are reported in the results section that follows.

Results

**Stage 1: Results of semi-structured interviews with senior/executive managers**

Interviewees included General Managers, Directors, Assistant Directors, Team Leaders, and Research Managers from each agency. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of participants. Of the 27 managers interviewed across each of the three agencies, the majority had over ten years’ experience in a variety of different public sector roles. In addition to this extensive public sector experience, many of the managers had worked in the parks sector for extended periods, often in a variety of different roles which involved overseeing and driving change within each agency. Given the premise of this study, this is
important as it is the recent changes in the environment in which parks are being managed that necessitate an examination of the benefits that park agencies desire to project.

All participants confirmed their role and that of their agency in communicating the benefits of visiting parks, either directly or indirectly. As one manager explained: ‘we are thinking very carefully about ... the messages we want to get out to people and how we want to deliver them and who they are and where they are and what market segment they might fall into, even though we don’t have a lot of good research around that.’ (DEC3).

At a macro level, the results of the interviews reveal that, collectively, senior managers at each agency are both knowledgeable and passionate about the range of benefits that visiting national parks can offer visitors and society. A total of 38 benefits were identified as salient across the three agencies, and these were relatively evenly distributed across the categories of personal (experiential), personal (higher-order), and community (societal) benefits. (See Table 1.)

 Insert Table 1 Here

*Personal (experiential) benefits: The realisation of satisfying experiences*

A total of 12 personal benefits relating to the realisation of satisfying experiences were identified from the three parks agencies (see Table 1). The first benefit identified as desirable to project was the opportunity to appreciate the scenic beauty of the varying landscapes across each state, as illustrated by one manager: ‘We want to project views of the Twelve Apostles [a significant Victorian landmark] or views of pristine forest or fern gullies or opportunities to experience quiet aesthetically pleasing or pretty areas’ (PV 7). At the same time, managers also highlighted the provision of experiences in a comfortable and safe place: ‘If we were to go to a national park in Africa and just go sort of walking out in the park you
would probably get eaten alive … whereas in Australia you get these natural experiences but delivered in a relatively safe way.’ (DEC 7)

The notion of challenging one’s self was also identified, as was the opportunity to escape urban environments. As noted by one manager, ‘people … can relatively easily tap into an experience which is completely different to being in a very dense city environment and … can get away from the rat race pretty easily … in our parks’ (OEH 8). The opportunity that national parks provide for people to experience something new and different was also identified by park managers. However, this was considered challenging because what is new and different is rapidly changing and dynamic, while park planning and marketing was identified as being ‘slow and reactive’ (PV1).

Opportunities to learn about the natural, cultural, and historic resources of parks were identified as desirable to project. However, it was noted that ‘agencies often talk about educating people [but] we need to inspire learning rather than project that we offer opportunities for formal education’ (OEH 9, emphasis added). Park managers from the three agencies also identified opportunities to participate in recreation activities in national parks, with ‘the full range from passive activity to very strenuous activity depending upon again the values of the park and the capacity of the park for those activities’ (DEC 7).

National parks were also thought to be places to reflect on personal values and, as suggested in the words of one manager, to stimulate thought: ‘Isaac Newton in theory discovered gravity because an apple fell on his head, where was he? Out in the environment…’ (PV 1). Words such as ‘reflection’ and ‘introspection’ were often used by managers to highlight this theme. The opportunity to relax and unwind and to find peace and solitude were also expressed as benefits to be conveyed and, importantly, ‘… getting people in there and saying to them enjoy the national park, enjoy the natural setting, but also appreciate the biodiversity values in that park’ (DEC 9, emphasis added). Finally,
opportunities to socialize with family and friends were identified as desirable to project by managers from each agency.

**Personal (higher-order) benefits**

Managers of the three agencies identified a total of 14 higher-order personal benefits, this time centered on the improvements, maintenance and/or prevention of (un)desired conditions (see Table 1). A common response by managers across all three agencies was ‘... the element of connecting with the past – and that whole culture and heritage element’ (OEH 2, emphasis added). Another key benefit identified by managers from the three agencies was the opportunity that national parks provide to connect with or even rediscover nature. Connecting or reconnecting with nature was identified as having a cascading effect into a range of other personal (higher-order) benefits, including both physical and mental health benefits through exposure to natural environments. In addition, as expressed by one manager, ‘... we would like to think there is a spiritual component as well, that people go to parks to re-nourish their soul and we certainly want to project that’ (PV 4, emphasis added).

The opportunity to expand social networks was noted as another benefit each agency desired to project, although these were identified to vary depending on the setting available. Participating in commercial tours and special interest groups based around particular activities were identified as providing the best opportunities for visitors to expand their social networks in parks. Connected to this theme, managers were particularly vocal about bringing families together, highlighting that parks provide families with a cost effective form of connecting outside of the home environment: ‘I think one of our key projections would be the ability for reconnection; reconnecting with nature, reconnecting with family’ (OEH 2).

Another benefit frequently mentioned by park managers was an improved quality of life. For most managers, quality of life was often described as interconnected with the
achievement of other benefits, such as physical and mental health – something visitors could achieve from multiple benefits through regular leisure and recreation in national parks. An additional benefit that emerged from the interviews was ‘... understanding the conservation values of those parks, [leading] to increased appreciation for the natural environment’ (DEC 9, emphasis added). The ability of parks to increase self-confidence was identified to be particularly relevant to children and teenagers: ‘If you look at many of the studies being done on development in children, exposure to the outdoors and to nature is an incredibly important aspect of skills development and we want visitors to understand that as well’ (OEH 9).

Mental health was raised on a number of occasions by managers from all three agencies. For PV in particular, mental health benefits were identified as central to the agency’s projected image: ‘...it’s about the Healthy Parks, Health People [HPHP] philosophy and why nature, parks, open space ... is good for you and why people should be connecting with parks for both mental and physical wellbeing’ (PV 3). In the interviews, mental and physical health benefits were often described as being connected with physical benefits, often translating into better mental health: ‘The promotion of physical health benefits has to come first, and mental health can often be connected to that’ (PV 9). Park managers noted a variety of specific health benefits that were desirable to project including the reduction in risk of stroke, heart disease, obesity, depression, and stress/anxiety: ‘We want people to associate their own health benefits with the health of the park, which parks present an opportunity to rebuild from the ills of a sedentary lifestyle’ (PV 2).

Societal benefits: Economic, environmental, and socio-cultural.

Finally, park managers of the three agencies identified 12 broader societal benefits as desirable to project (see Table 1). Firstly, managers indicated providing visitor experiences in
parks exposes visitors to the agency’s role in the *conservation of culture and heritage*, particularly in terms of protecting and conserving Indigenous heritage to ensure its availability for future generations. In the words of one manager:

*I think WA has the potential … of conveying a better understanding between Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians and how we try to knit and repair some of the problems that have arisen through history and that’s not an easy task.* (DEC 1)

Another societal benefit identified by managers as being desirable to project was the *generation of employment* that comes from providing visitor experiences in parks, particularly for some regional communities where the establishment of parks has led to closure of traditional industries resulting in job losses.

Senior managers also emphasised that providing visitor experiences in parks provides an opportunity to project each agency’s responsibility as a land manager, which includes ‘*…biodiversity conservation, good land management, being responsible land managers through fire protection, flood mitigation and management of weeds and pests but also conservation management, protecting threatened species*’ (OEH 5).

The preservation or establishment of new parks for conservation often results in the decline of traditional industries, such as logging, particularly in rural communities. As a result, managers expressed a desire to project that provision of visitor experiences in parks result in *business and tourism investment* in regions, stimulating local economies and providing the opportunity for residents to directly benefit from this: ‘*It is a triple bottom line type thing*’ (OEH 6). Despite this, questions were raised about the ability of parks agencies to project this benefit to communities, with a number of managers identifying the conservation of new land as an issue which has the potential to polarise communities and generate
resentment of parks by factions of locals: ‘There is a lot of economic and social activity leveraged off protected areas in smaller communities in WA on land we manage and we don’t really promote those as well as we could’ (DEC 3).

Recreation experiences in national parks were also identified, in the words of one manager, as ‘... very good for wellbeing, community wellbeing’ (OEH 9, emphasis added), assisting to create healthy, active, and vibrant communities. Connected to this theme, managers also felt that parks often bond people together:

*I think we also try to project a sense of pride and uniqueness. The community knowing that a park is in the area with unique flora and fauna and unique heritage sites ... reconnects the community and makes it feel proud of what it has.* (OEH 7, emphasis added)

Emerging from the physical and mental health benefits, managers noted ‘... the opportunities for both psychological and physical [improvements to] health to reduce pressures on the health system’ (OEH 9, emphasis added). A key point to emerge during this stage was managers’ emphasis on the laddering effect: ‘When we talk about healthy people we are not talking about the health sector, we are talking about the concept of what makes a healthy society’ (PV 1). When speaking about this point, managers often identified the challenge of convincing constituent publics of how the personal benefits of visiting and recreating in parks cascade into other elements of their everyday life, as well as into sectors of broader society.

Managers also expressed a desire to project the role parks play in inspiring people to advocate for an area’s protection:

*You know, the Kimberley [in northern Western Australia] protest that is on at the moment is another example of where people, you know, ... they don’t necessarily
agree with what’s happening so they want to protect it, and that’s because they understand the role we play in biodiversity conservation, because we make loads of effort to project that to people. (DEC 5, emphasis added)

According to some managers, the importance of projecting the other ecosystem services parks provide is often overlooked: ‘… providing clean air and water to the community. Most of the areas around our drinking water catchments are national parks so they act as an inner buffer to the protection of water quality’ (OEH 6, emphasis added).

Connected to the increasingly urbanised society, park managers also felt it was desirable to project that agencies were the key providers of green spaces for people to access and experience. Finally, while it was noted that park agencies do a great job in reducing the impact of climate change, managers thought that this could be better promoted to the public.

**Stage 2: Results of analysis of corporate documents**

The content analysis of the corporate documents revealed that the strategic communication by the three agencies about the benefits of visiting parks is of a fairly modest scale. On the other hand, the results indicate that all 38 benefits identified in the interviews with senior/executive managers were present in one or more of the key corporate documents of each agency. While one might argue that consistency between senior/executive managers and strategic documents would be expected, this result reinforces the strategic importance of this list of benefits to national park management agencies. Table 2 displays the benefit distribution derived from the analysis of corporate and strategic documents across the 3 agencies. The benefits in Table 2 are classified into primary and secondary categories based on the frequency each benefit item occurred in the corporate and strategic documents.

Insert Table 2 Here
As shown in Table 2, the primary benefit concepts to appear in DEC’s (WA) strategies were tourism, recreation, experience, nature, community well-being, culture, and employment. This was followed by community appreciation, environment, learning, and heritage. While still mentioned, the secondary benefits to emerge were mental health, stress, employment, challenge, spirituality, biological diversity, business investment, and climate change.

The primary benefits that appeared in PV’s (VIC) corporate documents related to health, including mental health, physical health, heart disease, and obesity. Community health and wellbeing, as well as tourism investment were secondary in the strategic documents, though these were polarised; that is, not closely linked conceptually within their strategic planning documents. These two areas were connected by the environment, suggesting that the documents convey the environment as being important for both of these benefits. While still mentioned, the less prominent benefits were connection, flood management, personal values, and biological diversity.

The primary benefit concepts in OEH’s (NSW) strategies were recreation, family, friends, outdoor, and challenge. The secondary benefit concepts to emerge were community, community well-being, environment, and quality of life. Secondary concepts that were mentioned but were less prominent included escape, flood management, personal values, drinking water, mental health, and spirituality. Overall, personal benefits were more prominent than societal benefits in the corporate documents.

Stage 3: Results of Survey with Executive Level Management

After a process of consultation and refinement a final pool of 39 benefits was included in the survey of the senior/executive managers across the three agencies. Given their positions of influence, the responses by these executives provide a window to the overall as
well as the relative importance placed by these agencies on communicating the benefits of experiences in parks. Based on the mean scores, OEH executives rated the desire to project only 14 out of the 39 benefits as a 6 or 7 (strongly or very strongly agree), and PV rating the desire to project only 11 out of the 39 benefits as a 6 or 7. DEC executive was the most modest of the three agencies in their ratings, with only 4 benefit items rated at a 6 or 7 and one (improved flood management) rated below the midpoint of 4. Other benefits rated relatively low (just above the midpoint) in terms of desire to project by DEC executive included challenge yourself and reflect on personal values, and by OEH executive included connect with spiritual side, improved flood management and reduction in the cost of healthcare. Figure 1, 2 and 3 displays senior/executive managers’ responses to the benefits items.

Insert Figure 1

Insert Figure 2

Insert Figure 3

As displayed in Figure 1, based on the executive/director survey the personal experiential benefits that PV most desire to project are access to natural experiences, learn about nature, culture and heritage, participate in outdoor recreation activities and socialise with friends and family. The benefits that DEC most desires to project are access to natural experiences, learn about nature culture and heritage, participate in outdoor recreation activities, and find peace and solitude. For OEH, projecting access to natural experiences, learn about nature culture and heritage, participate in outdoor recreation activities, and find peace and solitude are most desired.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, PV and DEC executives have a similar trend line with respect to personal higher-order benefits, while OEH diverts slightly from this trend line.
OEH rated four of the personal higher-order benefits more highly than the other two agencies: appreciate scenic beauty, connect with heritage, connect with culture and connect with nature. The four personal higher-order benefits that PV most desires to project are connect with nature, achieve physical health benefits, improve quality of life and appreciate scenic beauty. DEC executives rated appreciate biodiversity, connect with nature, improve quality of life and appreciate scenic beauty the highest. The four personal higher-order benefits rated the highest by OEH were connect with nature, appreciate scenic beauty, connect with culture and connect with heritage.

As shown in Figure 3, there was quite a different trend line across the three agencies with respect to projecting the broader societal/community-wide benefits of providing visitor experiences in parks. As already noted, DEC rated the desire to project benefits lower overall, particularly the societal/community-wide benefit items. The PV executive committee identified provision of green spaces, increased tourism, increased community wellbeing, protection of biological diversity and increased community pride as the societal benefits they most want to project. Societal benefits that DEC desires to project include protection of biological diversity, increased community wellbeing, protection of drinking water, and provision of green spaces. OEH’s directors desire to project protection of biological diversity, conservation of heritage, improved fire management, and increased tourism.

**Discussion**

The senior/executive managers interviewed were knowledgeable and passionate about the benefits of visiting national parks. In Stage 1 managers identified 38 benefits distributed between personal experiential (12), personal higher-order (14), and societal (12) benefits. Previous research has identified 142 key benefits of parks, though many are quite specific as compared to the more generic benefit items in the present study, and the majority were
identified in studies focused on urban parks (Driver 2008). The benefits identified from the Stage 1 interviews with park managers documents suggest a large and diverse range of benefits that agencies seek to convey as being associated with visiting national parks that were largely in line with previous literature on the benefits of leisure and recreation in parks (Driver 2008; Manning 2009). There were no benefit categories prominent in the benefits literature that managers failed to mention in the interviews.

In addition, there were at least four benefits identified by managers in Stage 1 that were largely absent from the benefits literature: ‘appreciate biodiversity’ (although implied in ‘environmental awareness/understanding’), ‘improved flood management’, ‘improved fire management’, and ‘reduce the effects of climate change’ (although implied in ‘ecosystem sustainability’). The latter three benefits in particular reflect recent global trends – notably climate change, the threats it poses, and the important role that park agencies play in responding to climate change. Less evident was articulation of the benefits that parks may provide in responding to the global economic crisis.

The analysis of corporate documents conducted in Stage 2 revealed similarities and differences in the benefits that each agency desires to project. The similarities are that all three agencies seek to and actively communicate the 38 salient benefits identified by senior/executive managers and that personal benefits are more prominent than societal benefits. The key benefits to emerge from the OEH (NSW) corporate document analysis were recreation, family, friends, outdoor, and challenge, which have previously been identified as key benefits of leisure and recreation in parks (Manning 2009). This highlights that OEH is quite focused on conveying that parks provide opportunities to achieve desired personal benefits relating to people realising or achieving satisfying experiences. However, the second level of benefits to emerge from the analysis of the corporate documents also reflected a
broader focus in NSW to include community wellbeing, the environment, and quality of life, reflecting the societal benefits of visiting parks.

In PV’s (VIC) corporate documents, physical and mental health benefits were most prominent. This finding is similar to Maller et al. (2009) who used PV as an example to examine in detail the health benefits associated with contact with nature. The finding also reflects PV’s long-established market position connecting to the health portfolio via the HPHP program (Crompton 2009). For DEC (WA), tourism, recreation, experience, nature, community well-being, culture, and employment were the most prominent themes in corporate documents. A secondary benefit focus of community appreciation, environment, learning, and heritage emerged from the corporate document analysis for DEC.

Stage 3 tapped into the perceive importance of the benefit items for senior/executive managers across the three agencies. The research found executive-level managers from each of the agencies follow a similar trend line with respect to personal experiential benefits. PV and DEC executive have a similar trend line with respect to personal higher-order benefits, while OEH diverts slightly from this trend line. The OEH executive rated four of the personal higher-order benefits more highly than the other two agencies: appreciate scenic beauty, connect with heritage, connect with culture and connect with nature. There were quite different trend lines across the three agencies with respect to projecting the broader societal benefits of parks. As already noted, DEC executives rated the desire to project benefits lower overall, particularly the societal benefit items.

Access to natural experiences was rated highly by the senior/executive managers of all three agencies; learn about nature, culture and heritage was rated highly by PV and OEH. OEH’s executive tended to rate the higher-order (personal) benefits of visiting parks higher than the other agencies. This includes appreciating scenic beauty, connecting with heritage,
connecting with culture and connecting with nature. The senior/executive managers’ ratings of desired benefits differed the most with respect to the societal benefits of providing visitor experiences in parks. OEH’s executive rated protection of biodiversity, conservation of heritage and improved fire management the highest. PV’s executive rated provision of green spaces the highest, but a number of other benefits were rated highly as well – protection of biodiversity, increasing community well-being, increased tourism and increased community pride. DEC’s executive ratings were comparably lower than those of the other two states, with protection of biodiversity rating the highest.

Although most of these benefits have been identified previously by Driver et al., (2008) this research has important implications for the strategic positioning of parks agencies with respect to benefits. Across all three agencies, the communication of benefits in corporate documents is relatively weak, and focused primarily on the personal benefits of visiting parks. Moreover, despite acknowledging that some 38 specific benefits associated with the provision of recreation experiences were identified by these agencies, the senior/executive managers are on average relatively conservative in their desire to project many of these benefits. It is unclear whether this is because they do not see these benefits as inherently important, or whether they are uncomfortable with their agency’s capacity to deliver these benefits. Thus, while there are several repositioning strategies that have been identified as available to park management agencies (Crompton 2009), the need for repositioning and the selection of the correct strategy may vary for each agency. An important related consideration is whether they perceive that re-positioning may be necessary.

Psychological repositioning consists of changing stakeholders’ perceptions about the benefits that parks can offer, so they better align with the position desired by park managers (Crompton 2000). This would be most appropriate if managers feel that the parks managed by their agency already provide these benefits. Real repositioning involves the development
of new services or the restructuring of existing services so they better contribute to delivering desired benefits (Crompton 2009). This is clearly resource-dependent and is appropriate if managers’ conservative responses regarding projected benefits reflect concerns that existing experiences in parks are in some way inadequate to provide those benefits. Associative repositioning focuses on aligning with other organisations that already possess the desired position and acquiring some of this position from the association, such as alignment with other providers of outdoor recreation experiences (Crompton 2008). Finally, competitive repositioning alters stakeholders’ perceptions about what an agency’s competitors do. This is perhaps the least likely and attractive option for a park management agency that relies on taxpayers to operate, as it may be seen as an inappropriate use of public money.

**Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research**

The aim of this paper was to identify the salient benefits that national park management agencies desire to project to visitors and the broader community, to determine the relative prominence of these benefits in strategic communication by these agencies, and to assess the relative importance of each benefit with respect to senior/executive managers’ desire to project these to their constituent publics. The interviews identified managers’ perceptions of the benefits of providing experiences in parks that each agency desires to project. In addition, an analysis of key corporate documents from each agency was utilised to capture and compare the relative prominence of benefits to those mentioned by managers. Finally, senior/executive managers rated their desire to project each benefit item, revealing the degree of importance they place on specific benefits and on the benefits of providing visitor experiences in parks generally.

Each parks agency was found to have a suite of satisfying experiences and benefits that they wanted to project to visitors, with many of these benefits being interrelated and
overlapping. As a result, the market position that managers desire each agency to occupy is complex and multifaceted with slight variations in benefit focus between the three agencies. Access to natural experiences, connect with nature, appreciate scenic beauty, and protection of biological diversity were the four benefits that were consistently rated highly among the executives/directors of all three agencies. Common across all these agencies, however, was that there is room for broadening the communication of benefits beyond the personal in corporate documents. There was also room for enhancing the importance that executive level managers place on projecting the benefits of visiting parks. There is also merit in considering the use of one or more repositioning strategies if agencies wish to maintain and improve visitors’ and community perceptions of the benefits of providing recreation experiences in national parks.

Whether parks in these three states actually deliver the benefits that management agencies seek to project was not the focus of this study. A few studies have attempted to measure and report selected benefits of visiting parks (Maller et al., 2006), however measuring higher-order and societal benefits in particular requires sophisticated and ideally causal and longitudinal research beyond the scope of the present study. Rather, the research has provided a series of benefit items that are meaningful to park managers. Those identified as most important provide an essential focus for future research determining the actual delivery of such benefits. Equally important, are the benefits accrued by those who never visit but obtain benefits – both personal and societal – through the existence of parks and other natural areas. It is also important for parks and their future, and foregrounded by this study, to understand the benefits that visitors are seeking from their park experiences. Visitor segmentation research has a valuable contribution to make here, with different types of visitors pursuing very different experiences and benefits (Crilley et al., 2012).
A vital next step from the present study is to determine what visitors and other stakeholders perceive as the benefits of providing experiences in national parks, to ascertain any gaps between these perceptions and what agencies desire to project generally and for socio-demographic segments. As such, these findings are a critical first step in helping park managers to improve their communication about the benefits of providing visitor experiences in parks, for example, the merits of using social media and other communication channels to convey benefits to particular market segments. Such communication may be key to closing any gaps between desired, projected, and perceived benefits and thus better positioning national parks to remain sustainable and economically viable.
Acknowledgements

This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's *Linkage Project* funding scheme (project number LP100200014).

Notes on contributors

**Brent Moyle** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, also based in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University. Brent’s primary research interests include tourism and visitor management in protected areas, the impacts of tourism on communities and the environment, as well as island tourism.

**Betty Weiler** is a Professor in the School of Tourism and Hospitality Management at Southern Cross University. Her research has predominantly focused on nature-based and heritage tourism in protected areas and at wildlife and heritage attractions, including the use of communication to manage and influence visitor behaviour.

**Susan Moore** is a Professor of Environmental Science in the School of Veterinary and Life Sciences at Murdoch University. She leads the Nature Based Tourism Group at Murdoch University. Susan is the author of more than 150 publications on nature based tourism, protected area management and biodiversity conservation policy.
References


Table 1. Benefits of Provision of Visitor Experiences in National Parks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal (experiential) benefits of recreation opportunities in parks</th>
<th>Personal (higher-order) benefits of recreation opportunities in parks:</th>
<th>Community (societal) benefits of recreation opportunities in parks:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to natural experiences</td>
<td>Connection to culture and heritage</td>
<td>Conservation of culture and heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciate scenic beauty</td>
<td>Connection to nature</td>
<td>Generation of employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be in a comfortable and safe place</td>
<td>Connection to spiritual side</td>
<td>Healthier community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge themselves</td>
<td>Expansion to social networks</td>
<td>Improved fire and flood management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escape urban environment</td>
<td>Family togetherness</td>
<td>Increased business and tourism investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience something new and different</td>
<td>Improved quality of life</td>
<td>Community well-being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn about nature, culture and heritage</td>
<td>Increased appreciation of environment</td>
<td>Increased sense of community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in outdoor recreation activities</td>
<td>Increased self-confidence</td>
<td>Protection of biological diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect on personal values</td>
<td>Mental health benefits</td>
<td>Provision of clean air and drinking water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax and unwind</td>
<td>Physical health benefits</td>
<td>Provision of green spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek enjoyment</td>
<td>Reduction in risk of stroke/heart disease</td>
<td>Reduction in the cost of healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialise with family and friends</td>
<td>Reduction in risk of obesity</td>
<td>Reduction in the effects of climate change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduction in depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduction in stress and anxiety</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Benefits Identified in Corporate Documents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>OEH</strong></th>
<th><strong>PV</strong></th>
<th><strong>DEC</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary</strong></td>
<td>Recreation</td>
<td>Health, including mental health, physical health, heart disease and obesity</td>
<td>Tourism, recreation, experience, nature, community well-being, culture and employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family, friends</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary</strong></td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Community health and wellbeing</td>
<td>Community appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community wellbeing</td>
<td>Tourism and investment</td>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td></td>
<td>Heritage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Primary benefits**: Most common benefits to emerge from corporate and strategic documents

**Secondary benefits**: Still emerged as prominent benefits in the corporate and strategic documents but less emphasis placed on these items
Figure 1 – Senior/Executive Managers’ Ratings of Personal Experiential Benefits
Figure 2 – Senior/Executive Managers’ Ratings of Personal Higher-Order Benefits
Figure 3– Senior/Executive Managers’ Ratings of Community Benefits of Visiting Parks