RELATIONSHIPS WITH MANY FACETS:
UNPACKING THE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN
PROTECTED AREA MANAGERS AND
COMMERCIAL TOUR OPERATORS

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degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Environmental Science
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28 June 2007
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research, unless otherwise stated. It contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

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ABSTRACT

For protected areas worldwide, commercial tour operators are increasingly providing the services and products desired and needed by visitors to these areas. Given the engagement of both protected area managers and tour operators in protected areas, and inevitably with each other, it is critical that their relationship and its complexities are clearly understood. As such, the interests of managers and operators overlap insofar as that they work in the same locales, share some of the burden of service provision, and aim to offer a quality product. However, this study shows that they diverge in other ways, particularly given the commercial imperative that necessarily strongly influences the activities of their business, irrespective of its location. This thesis seeks to unpack the complexities of a relationship that is critically important both in terms of the quality of the tourism experiences offered by protected areas, and the conservation of such areas in the longer term. In order to obtain an understanding of the complexity of the interactions between protected area managers and tour operators, qualitative research methods were used, in which in-depth interviews provided a rich picture of the important diverse aspects and facets impacting on their relationships.

This study found that both managers and operators considered the purpose of protected areas to be the conservation of biodiversity and their recreational use and enjoyment. Surprisingly, their similar values were unknown to them. A major influence on their relationships was their perceptions of power, with ‘dominant’ power largely based on legislative and regulatory mandates, perceived to rest with the protected area managers. In contrast, this study also found evidence of ‘resistant’ power. This form of Foucauldian power was held particularly by operators in one geographic locale, and was associated with the concepts of
cultural groupings and groupthink. The underlying public policy context influenced the effectiveness of the collaborative efforts of managers and operators. Interwoven with these differences were variable expectations regarding the nature and purpose of communication and what collaboration might ‘mean’. These findings importantly suggest several future directions for both practice and research. First, managers and operators share values and hold both similar and different expectations and perceptions, similarities and differences which are significant. Secondly, understanding the importance of power and how it is exercised is critical if successful relationships between managers and operators are to be fostered. Finally, further unpackaging of the meaning of communication and collaboration for managers and operators, a process initiated in this study, is essential if relationships between these groups involved in conservation and recreation in protected areas are to be improved. Therefore, this study suggests that their collaboration can be enhanced at individual, organisational/locale and policy levels, by adopting and implementing an action research framework.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

1.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1  
1.2 Challenges facing protected area managers and commercial tour operators .......... 2  
1.3 My personal motivations to conduct this research ................................................. 9  
1.4 Research question and objectives of this thesis ...................................................... 11  
1.5 Thesis structure ..................................................................................................... 13

## CHAPTER 2: ACQUIRING THE INFORMATION: THE RESEARCH APPROACH

2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................. 15  
2.2 Leading paradigm ................................................................................................. 17  
2.3 Crystallisation ...................................................................................................... 20  
2.4 Research design and methods ............................................................................. 22  
2.5 Data collection ..................................................................................................... 28  
2.6 Data analysis ....................................................................................................... 36

## CHAPTER 3: THE PLACES, THE PEOPLE AND THE TOURS

3.1 Introduction ........................................................................................................... 39  
3.2 Protected areas .................................................................................................... 39  
3.3 The Kimberley ..................................................................................................... 48  
3.4 The Midwest ....................................................................................................... 54  
3.5 The South West ................................................................................................. 59  
3.6 Description of protected area managers .............................................................. 61  
3.7 Description of commercial tour operators ......................................................... 68  
3.8 The tours ............................................................................................................. 74
## CHAPTER 8: IT IS ALL A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVES (ANALYSIS III) 219

8.1 Introduction 219
8.2 Perception and schema theory 220
8.3 Perceptions and expectations of each other 232
8.4 Their understanding, do they mean the same when they say the same? 238

### CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS 245

9.1 Introduction 245
9.2 Main research findings 246
9.3 Constraints to collaboration 249
9.4 Opportunities for collaboration 251
9.5 Future research 259
9.6 Final comments 260

REFERENCES 262
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview questions 281
Appendix 2: Fixed-choice prompt card 282
Appendix 3: Letter of invitation 283
Appendix 4: Idealised attributes of 'good' managers/operators 285
Appendix 5: Attributes managers/operators selected to describe each other 287
Appendix 6: Expected values for working in protected areas 288
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Comparison of the different paradigms and their position 18
Table 2.2: Main characteristics of research purposes 23
Table 2.3: Selection criteria for study sites 26
Table 2.4: Selection criteria for CTOs 28
Table 2.5: Total number of respondents per region 30
Table 3.1: IUCN categories for protected areas 40
Table 3.2: DEC’s administrative regions (regional/district/local offices) 46
Table 3.3: Offices where participating PAMs were based 63
Table 3.4: The regions in which participating CTOs and Tourism WA staff were based 70
Table 3.5: The type of tours offered by participating CTOs 76
Table 4.1: List of attributes PAMs selected to describe CTOs 92
Table 4.2: PAMs’ memorable experiences with CTOs 94
Table 4.3: Stakeholders included in PAMs’ sociograms 112
Table 4.4: The main purpose of protected areas as identified by PAMs 114
Table 4.5: The most important attributes and values PAMs identified for people working in protected areas. 117
Table 5.1: List of attributes CTOs selected to describe PAMs 130
Table 5.2: CTOs’ memorable experiences with PAMs 131
Table 5.3: Stakeholders included in CTOs’ and Tourism Western Australia officers’ sociograms 146
Table 5.4: The main purpose of protected areas as identified by CTOs 149
Table 5.5: The most important attributes operators identified to have when working in protected areas 152
| Table 6.1 | PAMs’ and CTOs’ values regarding protected areas | 167 |
| Table 6.2 | PAMs’ and CTOs’ values relating to tourism, nature, and WCPA’s intangible values | 169 |
| Table 6.3 | Comparison of DEC’s and Tourism Western Australia’s policy provisions relating to tourism in protected areas | 186 |
| Table 8.1 | Similarities and differences of PAMs’ and CTOs’ idealised attributes of a ‘good’ PAM/CTO | 234 |
| Table 8.2 | Attributes described by PAMs and CTOs in relation to how they perceive each other | 236 |
| Table 8.3 | Differences of assigned meaning of the same words/concepts used by PAMs and CTOs | 241 |
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Schematic outline of the research design

Figure 3.1: Map of Western Australia with DEC region and district boundaries with the identified research regions

Figure 3.2: DEC’s administrative Kimberley region

Figure 3.3: DEC’s administrative Midwest region

Figure 3.4: DEC’s administrative South West region

Figure 4.1: Identified barriers between PAMs and CTOs which hinder effective working arrangements, as seen by PAMs

Figure 4.2: PAM’s sociogram (Kimberley)

Figure 4.3: PAM’s sociogram (Midwest)

Figure 4.4: PAM’s sociogram (South West)

Figure 4.5: PAMs interactions with CTOs, based on all sociograms

Figure 5.1: Identified barriers between CTOs and PAMs which hinder effective working arrangements, as seen by CTOs

Figure 5.2: CTO’s sociogram (a) (South West)

Figure 5.3: Tourism Western Australia officer’s sociogram (Kimberley)

Figure 5.4: CTO’s sociogram (b) (South West)

Figure 5.5: CTOs’ and Tourism Western Australia officers’ interactions with PAMs, based on all sociograms

Figure 6.1: Spheres of intertwined tourism values

Figure 6.2: Tourism value spheres combined with nature values

Figure 9.1: Action research process model
LIST OF PLATES

Plate 3.1: Gibb River Road in the Kimberley 50
Plate 3.2: Four-wheel drive track into Purnululu National Park 50
Plate 3.3: Windjana Gorge National Park 52
Plate 3.4: Tunnel Creek National Park 52
Plate 3.5: Bell Gorge Fall 53
Plate 3.6: Bee hive domes in Purnululu National Park 54
Plate 3.7: Pinnacle Desert in Nambung National Park 56
Plate 3.8: Coastal Gorge Kalbarri National Park 57
Plate 3.9: Kalbarri National Park lookout ‘Nature’s Window’ 57
Plate 3.10: Stromatolites at Hamelin Pool 58
Plate 3.11: Big Lagoon – Shark Bay 58
Plate 3.12: Coastal heath Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park 61
Plate 3.13: Karri forest Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park 61
Plate 3.14: Limestone cave Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park 61
Plate 3.15: Four-wheel drive tour in Purnululu National Park 75
Plate 3.16: Abseiling 75
Plate 3.17: Coach tour in Nambung National Park 75
Plate 3.18: Sailing cruise Monkey Mia 75
Plate 3.19: Tag-along tour 75
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