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Sustainable Tourism: An Australian Perspective

Rob Harris and Neil Leiper (eds). Chatswood, Australia: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1995. Pp. xxxiii + 156. ISBN 0-7506-8919-6 (pbk): Aus\$45.

Let's start with a compliment. I realised upon finishing this book how much I had learned about the nitty-gritty of sustainable tourism practice. The book also took me, as a reader, to some very interesting places in Australia! That said, I think the book is mistitled; while as a sourcebook it contains some useful content, the book does not do what the title suggests. More on that later.

The 19 case studies in this book are organised into four sections: Natural attractions and management authorities (six chapters), Organisations (five chapters), Accommodation providers (five chapters) and Tour operators (three chapters). The 'stories' told by these case studies follow the same basic structure but are variable in style and in content; not one provides in-depth analysis or critique. The basic structure of each case follows that suggested by the editors: 'Overview', 'Planning and implementation', 'External environmental effects', 'Internal effects', 'Current status and next steps' and 'Lessons learned'. Instructions to firms/organisations, including the structure for the cases, are discussed in the Preface to the book.

Following the Preface are two vital sections: the Acknowledgments and the Editors' 17-page 'Sustainable Development and Tourism: An Overview'. The latter is an important introduction to the book because it is here that the reader gets to see something of the Editors' concept of sustainable tourism, which is primarily ecological. Besides a list of references, this Overview contains a useful contextualising of sustainable development/tourism and

the tourism industry, while drawing the reader to the micro-organisational level of discourse, which is the purpose of the book. It is here in the Overview that the editors provide a 36-point checklist of Industry practices leading to sustainable tourism. The table also indicates where in three of the four sections of the book each point is applied. The unstructured checklist ranges widely over issues from pollution control to fines for subcontractors, from 'hardening' to audits, from zoning to education of visitors, and so on. That the postscript to the Overview acknowledges the wider issue of sustainable tourism *vis-à-vis* sustainable development is useful but limited. That none of the case studies really addresses the wider issues of sustainable development is to be regretted.

The Acknowledgments, inconsequential to the reader in most books, is a very important part of this book because it allows the reader to identify the 'perspective' of each chapter; it is here that the 'corporate' identity of each author is given. The editors concede that the source of the information for each case/chapter was the organisation concerned; a rough count shows that almost three-quarters were actually written by the organisation being touted as 'best practice'. Not surprisingly, some of the chapters read like PR blurbs for marketing purposes or applications for industry awards. Self-aggrandisement is not rare. It may well be that these organisations are as good as they assert but the reader has no independent assessment by which to confirm this.

Of the five chapters written or co-authored by the editors, none provides 'hard' critical appraisal, although reading between the lines, comparing Club Med Lindeman Island and Green Island Resort suggests the latter is a marginally better example of 'best practice'. But, this is not really good enough; readers have a right to

expect a more thorough and evaluative assessment of operations when material is written by the editors and/or their students. The reader might expect this from all the chapters, given the title of the book.

But, the book is mistitled. The title and subtitle imply a much more substantial theoretical and critical discussion of Australian *views* on sustainable tourism, whereas this is a book of uncritical, non-theoretical case studies where the editors provide virtually no analysis. Another way of putting this is that there is nothing written that will offend any of the operators, organisations, or government bodies — their words have been taken at face value. Hopefully, most readers will not be so blasé.

So, what would be a more accurate title? Something like 'Tourism case studies: Australian environmental best practice' or 'Australian Sustainable tourism: Best practice case studies' or 'A view from inside: Sustainable tourism case studies from practitioners'. The latter (mouthful) is probably the most accurate reflection of the content as these are case studies written from the 'inside'.

While accepting these limitations, the discerning reader can learn a lot from this book, as my opening paragraph rightfully admits. For example, a number of chapters provide useful checklists and ethical practice statements: Earth Sanctuaries' *Consolidated Environmental Flows*; Australian Conservation Foundation's (ACF) *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Tourism*; Ecotourism Association of Australia's *Guidelines for Ecotourists* and *Code of Practice for Ecotourism Operations*; Pacific Asia Tourism Association's (PATA) *Code of Environmentally Responsible Tourism* and its *Green Leaf* checklist; Tourism Council of Australia's (TCA) *Code of Environmental Practice, Planning and Development* 'steps' and *Green Globe* brochure; and Green Island Resort's (Daikyo) *Code of Environmental Practice for Construction*.

The ACF wishlist is interesting in the context of the short-term profit motive of most businesses while the PATA *Code* pays scant regard to the human context of tourism. Its *Code* studiously avoids current issues such as human rights or sex tourism, aspects of tourism which should be key cultural and social indicators in any sustainable tourism model. We might assume that PATA will rectify this omission in light of the strong condemnation of

organised sex tourism by WTO at its General Assembly in Cairo in 1995.

It could also be that a checklist such as PATA's *Green Leaf*, which is not monitored effectively, is really just misleading window-dressing rather than a substantive contribution to sustainable development. Similarly, judging by the number of non-environmentally friendly operations we see in tourism, one would have to assume that either few belong to TCA or its guidelines are not effective. To be optimistic, the rhetoric is sound and maybe that is a worthwhile start. But, these codes are dominated by the physical environment so that the social and cultural aspects of sustainable tourism are almost invisible.

Further, a number of chapters provide useful and interesting insights into the corporate view of how their organisation, from planning through to operation, is sustainable: Jimby-Rinjah Lodge's environmentally sensitive design and operation; Seven Spirit Bay's approach to environmental protection in design and implementation; King Fisher Bay Resort's recognition of mistakes; and Quicksilver's pragmatic approach to not fouling its own pool on the Great Barrier Reef.

Further, we can read sustainable optimism from the Commonwealth Department of Tourism and a similar view of Rottnest Island in Western Australia. The latter must have been written by the then CEO before the change of WA government in 1993; Dr Back was soon 'moved' to a less sensitive location by the new government. The former must now be seen in light of a new coalition government in Canberra and at this time of writing means a wait-and-see attitude.

There are also some regrettable omissions: for example no airline, no major city hotel, no cruise ship operator. But perhaps none of the Australian operations even begin to think about being 'sustainable'.

In conclusion, let me say that I recommend this book as an informative read for those who have little or no acquaintance with the day-to-day problems and potential of sustainable tourism delivery. For those interested in the politics of self-presentation, this is a book that will bring a wry smile.

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