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Sustaining what? The Ethics of managing wildlife-tourism interactions

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Abstract:

Based on research at two locations in Australia this paper explores the ways in which both wildlife and tourists are managed, with particular focus on the management of their interactions, and presents a case for a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic. On Fraser Island in Queensland, Dingoes have gained widespread notoriety in recent years for their ability to harm people and consequently interactions are discouraged via a range of means. On Penguin Island in Western Australia, captive Penguins are used to educate visitors and controlled interactions are encouraged. With environmental sustainability a goal at both locations, managers make choices that are influenced by particular ethical stances.

The wildlife at each location is very different. Dingoes are one of many species on a large World Heritage listed island but they are the main form that consumes management time and resources. Penguins are one of comparatively few species on a much smaller island but are the key species visitors come to see. The tourists are also different. Penguin Island caters only for day-trippers whilst Fraser Island receives a much wider range of long and short-term holiday makers. Consequently, interactions also differ greatly.

Initial research was based primarily on the compilation and analysis of existing literature on wildlife tourism interactions and management in both the Australian and international contexts. Empirical data was then collected via observations, interviews and focus groups at both study locations with a wide variety of stakeholders over a period of eight years. This was supplemented with documentary research focused on relevant government policy documents as well as media reports and educational/interpretive material distributed to visitors at each location.

Findings demonstrate that management strategies range across a broad spectrum, from prohibiting interactions to actively promoting them; however, some degree of separation (physically or metaphysically) between the animals and the people is always present. The strategies employed have different outcomes for both the wildlife and the tourists.

On Fraser Island tourists are provided with educational and interpretive material in the forms of signs and brochures that give them reasons not to seek interactions with dingoes, which are constructed as dangerous. Fences have been built around key campsites, townships and resorts to keep dingoes away from people. On Penguin Island an interpretive

experience allows visitors the opportunity to view penguins in an enclosure and listen to an educational talk. Boardwalks built across the island encourage people to minimise their impact on the natural environment.

Although what works best in one situation might not be applicable in another, there are lessons that can be learnt from each of these case studies that may assist long-term sustainability of the wildlife tourism product. Managers need to question first what is being sustained, and why? The answer often depends on the ethical stance that is assumed, but in fact may not be shared by all stakeholders.

Ethics tend to be construed as being confined to humans, allowing the non-human sphere to be treated instrumentally (Plumwood 2003:53). This separation of humans and other animals has a long history in many cultures (Fennell 2008); however, in Western thought human control over animality is part and parcel of a more inclusive ideology of human mastery, or appropriation of nature (Ingold 1988, Manfredi, Teel, & Zinn 2009). This Eurocentric form of anthropocentrism can be linked to colonisation ideologies that demonstrate domination over all aspects of nature, including wildlife (Plumwood 2003:53).

Wildlife tourism is most frequently situated in the literature as a form of ecotourism. Ideally, ecotourism represents a culturally and ecologically sustainable form of tourism. Although many argue that these basic tenets have been eroded, the ideals of ecotourism are still worth pursuing (Fennell 2006).

Literature in the field of environmental ethics discusses a wide range of possible ethical stances toward nature and wildlife (see, for example, Callicott 2006, Fennell 2006, Macbeth 2005). However, underlying definitions of environmental ethics or ecoethics (the focus on a more holistic approach to morality and nature) is the individual's responsibility for doing one's part to ensure maintenance and sustainability of the earth's resources (Fennell 2006:192). While noble in design, the ethics remain anthropocentric.

Using examples from current management policies and practices on Fraser Island and Penguin Island, this paper argues the need for a non-anthropocentric environmental ethic in wildlife tourism situations. An ecocentric approach to environmental ethics that sees humans as living in, and being a part of, the wider biophysical environment (Fennell 2006:195) or members of a "biotic community" (Callicott 2006:128) would entail a management shift. This could come in adopting a more ecocentric ethical stance and recognising people as an integral part of, rather than separate from, the protected area being managed.

This approach may be closer to what informs ecotourism (Olwig 2004:492), and therefore a useful view for wildlife managers to explore with the goal of better understanding these types of tourists. This type of co-existence will work best if both people and wildlife are considered part of the natural environment, allowing for an ethical approach that is based in nature.

Future research will test the findings of this study by comparing the data from the two cases with other wildlife tourism destinations in Australia.

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