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TOURISM ENTERPRISES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

In Australia as worldwide, tourism enterprises may produce both negative and positive consequences for sustainable development (Buckley, 2009). The broad categories are reviewed in Chapter 3. The main focus of this chapter is therefore to illustrate these various links through recent research and case studies in an Australian context. The dates when data were collected, and the degree to which coverage can be considered as comprehensive or otherwise, differ from one issue to another.

GOVERNMENT POLICY CONTEXT

Environmental Impact Assessment for Major Tourism Developments

Australia is a federated nation with three tiers of government, and provisions for environmental impact assessment at local, state and federal level depending on the scale of the development application. The majority of tourism developments, particularly in urban areas, are subject only to local government planning controls. Larger developments, particularly stand-alone resorts in greenfields sites, or those which require major public works such as port or harbour facilities, are generally subject to formal EIA at state government level. Federal EIA legislation is triggered only if a new tourism development, or sometimes associated infrastructure, falls under one of the heads of power allocated to the federal government under the Australian Constitution. In a tourism context, the most common of these is the international affairs power, which includes obligations under international treaties such as those associated with World Heritage.

Triggers and thresholds for various levels of EIA for tourism developments in Australia were reviewed recently (Buckley, 2007), drawing on earlier work by Warnken and Buckley (1995, 1996). The principal patterns may be summarised as follows. There are considerable differences in the way which individual local government authorities (LGAs) treat tourism development applications. There are differences between LGAs in different states, because of different state legislation; but there are also differences between neighbouring LGAs within any one state, because of local politics. For major tourism developments which trigger EIA at state government level, the technical quality of the EIA documents is relatively poor (Warnken & Buckley, 1998, 2000), commonly with inadequate baseline information to detect any future impacts.

For those tourism development applications which trigger a federal government involvement, the technical quality of EIA is generally much higher, even if the EIA process itself is managed by the state government. This includes, for example: tourism within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, which is managed by a federal agency; developments within or adjacent to land managed by Parks Australia, the federal protected area management agency; and developments which might affect World Heritage sites. Since most of Australia's 14 World Heritage areas are in fact managed by state government agencies, the federal government does not automatically become aware of tourism development proposals which may affect them. Commonly, it is left to voluntary conservation organisations to alert the federal environment agency. Indeed, such nongovernment organisations often have to enlist the voluntary assistance of university ecologists to prepare a dossier of likely impacts, in order to convince the federal agency to exercise its powers.

References

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