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Published

2004

Journal Title

Journal of Ecotourism

DOI

[10.1080/14664200508668433](https://doi.org/10.1080/14664200508668433)

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Research Note

Ecotourism Land Tenure and Enterprise Ownership: Australian Case Study

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Introduction

Ecotourism has been promoted widely as a potential tool in conservation and community development, in both developed and developing nations (Fennell, 1999; Weaver, 2001). In some instances at least, ecotourism has indeed contributed to conservation on private, community, or public lands outside the protected area estate (Buckley, 2003a; TOISTD, 2003; WTO, 2002). Elsewhere, however, tourism industry promoters have used the term ecotourism simply as an avenue to increase access to protected areas by commercial tourism operators, most recently under the guise of so-called partnerships (Buckley, 2002, 2003b). The outcomes of ecotourism hence depend not only on the ecotourism enterprise itself, but on the land or water where it operates. This aspect of the ecotourism sector, however, seems to have received rather little attention in the research literature. It has become contentious in Australia recently because of current political pressures to expand commercial tourism operations in protected areas (Australia DITR, 2003; Buckley, 2003b), and efforts to improve conservation on private land (Australia NHTT, 2003). Here, therefore, I examine the degree to which existing ecotourism enterprises in Australia operate on various different types of land tenure; and consider how these results may be relevant worldwide.

Methods

In 1999 we sent questionnaires to every outdoor tour operator listed in telephone directories throughout Australia, seeking information on gross annual turnover and various other financial statistics (Buckley, 1998). We also asked *inter alia* what land tenures they used. The response categories for this question were: national park, state (public) forest, private land, Aboriginal (community) land, leasehold pastoral land and 'other'. National parks included World Heritage areas, and 'other' categories included land owned by local government agencies. In order to obtain commercial information of this nature, we took careful precautions to ensure that questionnaire responses were anonymous. Geographical information requested, for example, was deliberately imprecise; and whilst some respondents provided detailed lists of operational sites, others did not. We did consistently receive information on the types of land tenure used. Overall, we received 217 useable responses to this question. Almost all the responses were from private-sector tourism operators and only these are reported here.

Few respondents indicated what proportions of their operations took place on each of the different land tenure types they referred to, or the spatial extent of the areas concerned. For each completed questionnaire, therefore, the data available are simply a set of yes/no responses for each potential land tenure type. In analysing such data, the relative weightings attached to different responses are potentially critical. If one ecotourism enterprise operates only in national parks, whereas another operates in, say, three different land tenure types of which national parks are only one, should the two positive data points for the national park category be accorded equal weight, or should the latter receive only one third weighting? If two enterprises both use pastoral lands but one has 10 times the annual financial turnover of the other, should the two positive data points for pastoral lands be accorded equal weight, or should one receive 10 times the weighting? To examine whether the results are sensitive to such weightings, responses were examined using three different approaches.

In the first 'raw' approach, all records were treated equally, so that, for example, a record of a company operating on private land only was treated the same as a record of a company operating on private land but also elsewhere. In the second, 'proportional' approach, each company was given equal weight, so that records for a company operating on private land, parks and pastoral leases would be scored at one-third each. In the third, 'weighted' approach, the proportional data were weighted according to the approximate annual turnover of the company concerned, in four categories: <\$10,000 pa, \$10,000–\$100,000 pa, \$100,000–\$1,000,000 pa and \$1,000,000–\$10,000,000 pa. All figures are in 1999 Australian dollars. Under this approach, records for a company in each turnover bracket received weightings of 1, 10, 100 and 1000 respectively.

Results

The response rate to the mail-out was only 10%, and we cannot be certain that it was representative (Buckley, 1998). Based on these responses, results are as follows. By far, the majority of Australian outdoor tour operators use more than one type of land tenure: only 18% use only a single type, and many use three, four or more. Fewer than 5% overall used pastoral leases, local government or other lands, and these are excluded from the analysis below. Raw responses indicate that 37% of outdoor tour operators in Australia use national parks, 26% use private lands, 24% use public forests and 13% use community lands (Table 1). There were no significant differences between revenue categories (chi-square test, $p > 0.05$). Dividing records proportionately between multiple land tenure types intensifies these differences slightly: 43% in national parks, 26% on private lands, 21% in public forests and 10% on community lands (Table 2). Weighting by annual revenue suggests that ecotourism operations in national parks contribute 38% of total annual revenue, private lands 33%, public forests 16% and community lands 13%. For enterprises with annual turnover >\$1m, approximately three quarters of their revenue derives from operations on parks or private lands and one quarter from public forests and community lands. For businesses with

Table 1 Numbers of ecotourism enterprises in different income categories using different land tenures in Australia: Raw records

| <i>Raw</i> | <i><10K</i> | <i>10–100K</i> | <i>100–1M</i> | <i>1–10M</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>%</i> |
|------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|----------|
| Park | 28 | 56 | 40 | 17 | 141 | 37 |
| Private | 23 | 39 | 25 | 12 | 99 | 26 |
| Forest | 18 | 39 | 25 | 8 | 90 | 24 |
| Community | 9 | 20 | 14 | 7 | 50 | 13 |
| Total | 78 | 154 | 104 | 44 | 380 | 100 |

Table 2 Numbers of ecotourism enterprises in different income categories using different land tenures in Australia: Proportional allocation

| <i>Proportional</i> | <i><10K</i> | <i>10–100K</i> | <i>100–1M</i> | <i>1–10M</i> | <i>Total</i> | <i>%</i> |
|---------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|----------|
| Park | 16 | 40 | 19 | 7 | 82 | 43 |
| Private | 14 | 19 | 10 | 7 | 50 | 26 |
| Forest | 9 | 16.5 | 11 | 2.5 | 39 | 21 |
| Community | 4 | 8 | 5 | 2.5 | 19.5 | 10 |
| Total | 43 | 83.5 | 45 | 19 | 190.5 | 100 |

annual turnover <\$1m, corresponding figures are approximately two thirds of one-third.

The questionnaire responses also contained information on the geographic areas or regions where each tourism operation is based. Broadly, it seems that most businesses take advantage of all land tenures locally available. Aboriginal lands and pastoral leases are not uniformly distributed geographically, for example, so businesses are more likely to use these tenures in some regions than others. We did not ask respondents to estimate the spatial area of each land type they used. They may, for example, operate in a large national park plus a small private property nearby. Hence the figures above cannot be converted to area terms.

The principal conclusion from the data, therefore, and one which would appear to be reasonably robust, is that outdoor tourism operations in Australia are by no means restricted to a single land tenure such as protected areas. Rather, they use all available lands, with private land almost as popular as parks.

Discussion

The results given above are all for private-sector tourism operators. Worldwide, and indeed also in Australia, many ecotourism enterprises are also operated by public land management agencies, and by community and other organisations. Generalising the Australian approach presented above, we may classify ecotourism enterprises according to ownership categories, and operating areas according to land tenure type, so as to examine the interrelationships between the two.

Ecotourism enterprises may usefully be classified into four types, namely those owned by:

Table 3 Ecotourism land tenure and enterprise ownership worldwide (from Buckley, 2003)

| <i>Land tenure</i> | <i>Enterprise ownership</i> | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|--|--|
| | <i>Public</i> | <i>NFP/NGO</i> | <i>Community</i> | <i>Private</i> | |
| <i>Public, protection</i> | type | visitor management in national parks and other protected areas | NFP, NGO and school trips in public parks | community ventures in national parks, principally in developing nations | commercial tour operations, outfitters and concessionaires in parks |
| | scale | ● ○ | ○ | – | * † |
| <i>Public, production</i> | type | visitor management in public forests etc. e.g. US Forest Service wilderness areas | NFP, NGO and school trips in public forests, rangelands etc. | e.g. First Nations tourism in arctic Canada, Alaska; community tourism in central and southern America | e.g. ski resorts in USFS lands, safari concessions in sub-Saharan Africa |
| | scale | ○ ○ | – | * | * |
| <i>Community</i> | type | visitors in parks leased from traditional owners, e.g. in Australia | NGO-sponsored tours and joint enterprises on communal lands | community enterprises on communal lands: e.g. in central and southern America | commercial outfitters on communal land, e.g. Arctic |
| | scale | – | – | – | * |
| <i>Private</i> | type | parks occasionally lease private land for public facilities | some NGO's own land privately and operate ecotours | rare | most ecologies and some ecotours are on private land |
| | scale | – | – | – | ● |
| <i>Ocean</i> | type | recreational boating on territorial waters and high seas | educational 'tall ships' voyages, NFP marine tours | rare | commercial boat tours and charters |
| | scale | ● ○ | – | – | ● |

Key

Type: Broad descriptions of typical activities in this category. Shown for more common combinations only
 Scale: (developed nations on left, developing on right) ● = large and well-established; ○ = large but smaller than ●, often varies considerably between individual nations; * = growing; † = controversial; – = rare

- private businesses, such as companies, partnerships and individuals;
- communal groups, e.g. in Indigenous or tribal societies;
- not-for-profit and non-government organisations; and
- public agencies, including public land management agencies themselves.

Land tenure types may be classified in a similar way:

- private lands, freehold or long-term leasehold, often broad-acre rangelands and woodlands;
- communal lands, e.g. those held under traditional tenure systems or dedicated as Indigenous reserves;
- public lands allocated for primary production, such as forests and public rangelands; and
- public protected areas, including World Heritage sites, national parks and nature reserves.

Using these classifications, a matrix of the main possible combinations of land tenure and enterprise ownership is shown in Table 3. The table also indicates the approximate global frequency of each combination, based on case studies such as those in Buckley (2003a). Different combinations, however, appear to be more common in different countries, and these variations appear as regional ecotourism signatures. Many public land management agencies list tourism companies with relevant operating permits. There seem to be few if any comparative quantitative data, however, on the relative scale of ecotourism in different land tenures.

As part of ongoing analysis and debate into the significance of ecotourism for conservation and community development in various parts of the world, therefore, it would seem worthwhile to quantify the use of different land tenure types in different countries and regions, in addition to existing research on economics, enterprise, structures and management, policies and other aspects.

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