

Unintended de-marketing manages visitor demand in Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

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Introduction – de-marketing defined

Kotler and Levy (1971, p.76) introduced the term ‘de-marketing’, defined as ‘that aspect of marketing that deals with discouraging customers in general or a certain class of customers in particular on either a temporary or permanent basis’. Subsequently, Groff (1998) interpreted the concept in the context of parks and recreation administration. Recently, Armstrong and Kern (2011) used the concept to underpin their investigation of visitor demand management within the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWhA), Australia. We supported the findings of these researchers, and offer additional examples of de-marketing in this protected area.

De-marketing in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area

Since the late 19th century, the Blue Mountains National Park, now incorporated into the GBMWhA, has been one of Australia’s best-known and most popular nature tourism destinations, especially among day-trippers from nearby Sydney. However, its popularity has waned in recent decades, and there is risk of further decline. For example, during 1999-2009, domestic overnight visitors fell by 45% while international overnight visitation remained generally stable. Day visitors also declined by 59% during 1999-2004 and, despite subsequent partial recovery, in 2009 numbers remained 36% below those of 1999 (Hardiman & Burgin, 2011). Rather than facing excessive tourist demand, as perceived by park management staff (Armstrong and Kern, 2011), the GBMWhA is experiencing a substantial decline in visitation although not as a result of deliberate de-marketing. Whether the decline in demand is sufficient to ensure environmental sustainability is unknown. This is due, in part, to the GBMWhA’s large geographical coverage and unfenced boundary, which make it difficult to determine visitor numbers, which locations, and what recreational activities are being undertaken within its boundaries (Hardiman & Burgin, 2011).

In the context of the land managers’ vision for GBMWhA, ‘...[to provide] a range of high quality nature-based recreational experiences ... on an environmentally sustainable basis...’ (NPWS, 2001), de-marketing is one approach that could achieve this outcome. However, Armstrong and Kern (2011, p.28) did not find a ‘holistic or systematically planned de-marketing strategy’ among park management. They concluded, however, that there was ‘latent use of de-marketing’. One reason suggested was that ‘marketing has not been ‘a good word’ in the land manager’s vocabulary for ‘many, many years’. If correct, we suggest that there is a lack of understanding of the marketing concept within the management body, and confusion of the broader concept of marketing (crucially, a matching of supply and demand in a sustainable manner) with marketing communication (e.g., advertising, sales, public relations and other forms of sales promotion).

We concur with Armstrong and Kern’s (2011) conclusion that successful promotion of the GBMWhA is lacking. For example, we found that only 16% of international (18.5% domestic) visitors were aware that the area was a World Heritage Area five years after its listing. Few visitors had accessed the GBMWhA’s web site (3.0% international; 8.8% domestic) or used the

information boards (8.0% international; 10.1% domestic) within its boundaries (Hardiman and Burgin, 2013). This indicates a lack of interest in the marketing to attract visitors, and for the provision of information on the GBMWHHA.

Lack of integrated management of recreation and conservation in the GBMWHHA was also been commented upon by Armstrong and Kern (2011). While they interviewed staff, we found that, at the broader Regional scale there appeared to be a profound lack of integrated marketing of the GBMWHHA as a tourism destination. In addition, Armstrong and Kern (2011) identified 'several' de-marketing measures that unintentionally controlled visitor demand in specific locations within GBMWHHA and/or specific user segments. 'Almost all participants' in their study commented on 'limiting recreational activities'. Among the activities that were recorded was canyoning. In our studies we found that after substantial growth in canyoning in the GBMWHHA's wilderness areas during the 1990s there was a substantial drop in participation by 2000 when numbers had stabilised. We found that even at its most popular, canyoning had no discernible effect on aquatic fauna; however, management measures were introduced to limit canyoning (closure of vehicle access; limiting numbers allowed on commercial tours). These are typical de-marketing strategies. However, the basis for the restrictions was erroneous since 1) they were implemented after visitor numbers had substantially dropped; 2) most canyon locations are either not visited or visitation is low; 3) most canyoningers visit in small groups (2-5), and few canyoning with commercial groups; and 4) small off-road bikes bypass barriers, use footpads, readily conceal their bikes in undergrowth while the owner is canyoning, and thus limiting of vehicle access is ineffective. Closure of tracks without information on alternative opportunities for bushwalking, lack of parking and, where metered, its high cost have all contributed to the unintended de-marketing of the GBMWHHA.

Conclusion

The concept of undertaking this study was to encourage reflection on their management approach among protected area management staff. It would also be desirable to engage other stakeholders to encourage an integrated, holistic approaches to management of protected areas, in terms of marketing and de-marketing (as appropriate). However in GBMWHHA continuation on current downward trends visitation may mean that there will be no need for de-marketing.

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