

# Willingness of local residents to participate in protected area enhancement in the urban/rural fringe: harnessing the potential of enlightened mass tourism

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High order protected areas are increasingly essential mechanisms for preserving biodiversity, but reductions in government funding for public protected areas are leading to growing reliance on visitor-based revenue (Bushell & Eagles, 2007). This reliance, however, is problematic with regard to the negative impacts associated with increasing numbers of park visitors. As described by Budowski (1976), the relationship between protected areas and visitors is most often characterised by *conflict* or *coexistence*, and the ideal of *symbiosis* is still seldom encountered. Yet, there is much to be gained by repositioning the relationship as an *opportunity* rather than inherent threat. This could be represented by the visitor who participates in the on-site removal of exotic weeds and in turn receives personal physical, psychological and social benefits. It is likely, however, that visitors are extremely diverse in terms of their willingness to participate in various site-enhancement activities, and any efforts to promote park-visitor symbiosis through the establishment of an ecotourism strategy (Fennell & Weaver, 2005) must identify these diverse proclivities.

To this effect, domestic visitors to the IUCN Category II Lamington and Springbrook National Parks, in the hinterland of Australia's Gold Coast, were asked to assess their willingness to participate in 20 hypothetical activities, both on-site and off-site, that could help to enhance the park's biodiversity (Weaver, 2013). These parks are especially important because of their pristine sub-tropical rainforest habitat, which occupy only 0.3% of Australia but accommodate 60% of Australia's endemic plant species and one-third of its bird and mammal species. Attendant threats such as invasions of exotic vegetation and over-visitation are exacerbated by the proximity (one hour's drive) of Lamington and Springbrook to the 2.5 million residents of the Southeast Queensland urban agglomeration.

From mid-2010 to mid-2012, 804 valid questionnaires were received, of which almost three-quarters came from local residents of greater Brisbane and Gold Coast. Cluster analysis of the responses to the 20 hypothetical activities revealed the expected variability in proclivity, with segments ranging in from the *enthused* and *incidentally enthused* (20%) to the non-supportive *incidentals* and *disengaged* (43%). The former, as expected, were the only group enthusiastic about traditional on-site volunteering activities ("focused activism") such as weed removal and participating in research projects. Local residents were disproportionately represented in this group. Most visitors, however, were willing to engage in "incidental activism" involving the opportunistic removal of litter while hiking and reporting unusual activity to rangers.

The results attest to the potential of residents to function as an opportunity to enhance the biodiversity of local protected areas. However, because enthusiasm for focused activism is evident only among a small minority of visitors, it appears as if incidental activism is a much more effective way of involving "average" local residents who otherwise exhibit barriers to participation in more intensive activity. This can then be used as a basis for fostering higher levels of involvement, especially among younger residents who were under-represented in the sample and indicate increased alienation from the natural environment. The results also indicate that egotistical motivations such as "having fun" are just as important as or more important than altruistic motivations such as "making a difference". Ecotourism strategies, therefore, need to engage individual preferences and needs. A major implication of the research is that almost all visitor-

residents have the potential to participate in at least some form of site enhancement, and that this embodies an aspirational model of “enlightened mass tourism” in which the assets of mass tourism (and in particular economies of scale) are selectively combined with the assets of alternative tourism (in particular ethical imperatives and compassion) to realise the elusive ideal of park-visitor symbiosis (Weaver, 2014).

### *References*

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