Frameworks for what? Australian experiences and developments in strategic frameworks for visitor management

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In Australia over the last three decades, planning frameworks such as the recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) and limits of acceptable change (LAC) have been applied to protected area planning and management. A total of twenty applications was identified by McArthur and Sebastian (1998) in their comprehensive review of framework implementation in this country. These frameworks had been applied to national parks (including islands), groups of parks and reserves, walking tracks and state forest (similar to national forests in other countries). Most applications have been at a regional or state rather than a site specific level. Virtually all regional applications have involved more than one agency.

Most protected area agencies blend one or more approaches, with the most extensively applied models being ROS, LAC and Visitor Impact Management (VIM). Most applications emphasise monitoring and the selection of indicators, with limited attention paid to the assessment of data (the early, critical steps of most of these frameworks). Australia has also seen the development of the Tourism Optimisation Management Model (TOMM), which takes into account the broader social, political and environmental context, as well as using scenario generation to manage into the future (Manidis Roberts Consultants 1997, Newsome et al. 2002). This framework was developed specificallyto help plan for the tourism use of Kangaroo Island off the southern coastline of Australia. The model draws heavily on ROS and LAC.

A more recent review of visitor management frameworks, with respect to Australia's protected areas (Brown et al. 2006), concluded that Australia uses these frameworks less than their North American counterparts. The reasons given included: (1) more limited staff and financial resources; (2) the dispersed management of protected areas in Australia – by many state-based agencies, rather than a small number of federal agencies as is the case in the United States (e.g. the USDA Forest Service manages wilderness areas nationwide), making nationally standardised approaches difficult to achieve; and (3) fewer ongoing partnerships between universities and protected area agencies (again a strength in North America). Half of the cases reviewed by McArthur and Sebastian (1998) used external expertise in their development stages.

The last decade in Australia and internationally has seen the emergence of management effectiveness frameworks. The most well known in protected area management is the IUCN Management Effectiveness Evaluation Framework (Hockings et al. 2000) with its focus on monitoring management effectiveness and then using the results to improve management. The selection and monitoring of indicators is central. This approach has been adopted by several of the state protected area agencies in Australia. Adoption relies on employing social researchers and committing resources to monitoring, one or both of which remain problematic for at least some of the protected area agencies in Australia.

Given that the older visitor frameworks and this newer management effectiveness approach both draw heavily on monitoring, some synergies between the two seem possible. These possibilities were explored by Moore et al. (2003). They concluded that the objective-based approach in LAC and other related frameworks helps to maintain a clear focus on measuring the effectiveness of management, directly relevant to the objectives of the protected area. Also noted was the value of LAC and other frameworks in considering both biophysical and social indicators, with management

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effectiveness work having been critiqued for having a strong biophysical emphasis with limited attention to visitor (social) related indicators (Moore & Walker 2008). A final comment from the Moore et al. (2003) work was that the older visitor frameworks needed broadening to address management processes and systems (and in turn develop indicators and standards) that are fundamental components of the IUCN framework.

Australia and other countries are moving towards adoption of the IUCN management effectiveness framework or related approaches. The challenge is to make sure that the best of the older visitor frameworks is not lost in the transition i.e. 'the baby is not thrown out with the bath water'. Features of these older frameworks of potential use to current management effectiveness efforts include: (1) explicit management objectives; (2) a range of recreation opportunities based on data; (3) resource and social indicators; and (4) public consultation as an integral part of visitor planning and management.

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