

# **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM CONFERENCE PAPER BY MARK MANTEIT HOBART 29-10-01**

**“THE BALANCE BETWEEN ECONOMIC SURVIVAL AND SUSTAINABLE  
CONSERVATION”**

I expressed an interest in writing and presenting this paper sometime ago because I wanted other organisations to benefit from the “trials and tribulations” CWS had recently undergone to reach a “balanced combination” or mix in order to be able to sustain its business.

Make no mistake, Wildlife Tourism is a tough, competitive business and not for the feint hearted or those wishing to make a “quick buck”. It is all about maximising your assets, which include cash resources, your people and your most important valuable asset or product, “your surroundings”. It’s about balance between the “tree huggers” and the “commercial beasts”. Having said that, most people who are in Wildlife Tourism are there not only to make “a buck”, but also because they care about their environment and DO want to see sustainability of the environment and also their businesses, like me.

Having done the hard yards of internal naval gazing and review after review of our business, Currumbin has come out the other end and now not only survives, but is looking forward to a prosperous and a sustainable future. It has achievable targets, business plans, and action plans which involve staff at all levels. These plans include business targets and real plans for our wildlife and collection.

To be sustainable from a business viewpoint in the long term, make no mistake - you MUST be profitable (unless you have an endless supply of money from the Govt) and maximise your revenue opportunities– the buck stops with this little black duck at Currumbin, so the more profitable we are, the more money we put back into our animals and their future well-being, and providing more meaningful and educational experiences to visitors. Capital projects, repairs and maintenance and of course the proprietors of the business “must get a feed” also. Why else would we as business people do it?

So if you can be sustainable from a business viewpoint, then our native wildlife also has an opportunity for survival also. Look at the most profitable zoos in Australia, Seaworld which started life as a dolphin Park, Dreamworld which started as a hard ride park and then got animals, and Movieworld which owns a large track of land and I am told will develop an Animal Kingdom shortly.

CWS has now commenced a consultancy service to other Wildlife Tourist Attractions which we believe will help other enterprises survive and prosper, particularly in these tough times. I have recently visited a number of Wildlife Tourist Attractions and there is not one I believe where we cannot add value or where things can be done more efficiently.

So what have we done that makes us different or ahead of the pack or which sets us aside from our competitors and industry partners?

**The key components include: -**

- **A Good Accounting Information system** to monitor demographics and different areas of your business with key performance indicators. You must have a steering wheel to know where you are going. You need to know what demographics are coming and accurately target cost effectively those which are not. Eg Wet n Wild.
- Making sure we get **“bums on seats”**. Don't wait until people come through the door. There is no point in setting up an exhibit, if people aren't interested in coming to visit. Eg. Rock Wallabies.
- **Be competitive and individual**. Don't be a “me too”. Eg there are now 4 parks on the Gold Coast doing sheep shearing.
- **Interactiveness with animals**. Visitors' expectations are far different than they were even a few years ago. Because of the internet, and graphics that programs like David Attenborough provide, people want more these days. They also want to see animals in a natural looking environment and activity, not asleep in a concrete cage or from a massive distance.
- Whatever we do is a **“win-win” for most or all internal departments**. You always ask the questions –Will it drive the gate, will it be entertaining, is it educational, will it help conservation, can we afford it, can we make a buck. If the

answer is yes to all those questions, it's normally a winner eg. recent free flight bird show, Seaworld's Polar bears.

- **Empower the people**, eg. All of our wildlife staff are involved in focus groups to develop smart new exhibits and attractions. They know they must answer the magic questions before management will consider implementing, but it is having a very positive effect on morale and staff knowing that they can make a difference.
- **Be smart about your business** and continually seek out new ideas or revamped ones.
- **Provide entertainment where possible, but be smart about it** eg. Barnyard Babies. People want it these days.
- **Making people accountable.** Set the budgets and key performance indicators. Eg. Photos sold last year compared to this year, increasing the "per caps in Retail and F&B", costs under control.
- Just because we are in wildlife, doesn't mean we can't be **"commercial"**. We don't need to "hug the trees" all day and every day. Photography opportunities with dingoes, birds, snakes, animals, koalas. Retail up-selling with photos and frames. F&B selling scoop ice creams instead of on a stick.
- **Look for partnership opportunities wherever possible**, rather than doing all the hard yards yourself eg Sea world help for CWS, Golden Casket, Pauls Milk, Cadburys etc. The distribution networks are the key.
- **"Never" subcontract out revenue earning opportunities** such as food and beverage, photography and retail.
- **Spend money wisely to "make money"**. Eg. Rock wallaby exhibits.
- **Keep it simple** – "KISS" Principle
- For those who have zoos, **have a Collection Plan and drive it**
- **Have focused research with identifiable outcomes**

## MARKETING

From my experience, no matter what industry you are in, you need to build relationships, and how do you do that? By not sitting on your backside, you need to be out there knocking on doors and asking/begging/annoying people until they provide the business that you want. Unless you ask, "you'll never ever know.....".

Secondly, you need to provide the service to visitors once you obtain the bookings, i.e. provide “the experience” as being worthwhile and “value for money” so that operators and guests will want to come back. In many cases, this entails having detailed and foolproof systems. Murphy’s law dictates” what can go wrong, will go wrong” so you need to make your systems “mug-proof”, particularly where tree huggers are involved.

### **Sponsorship**

The tide is turning if you believe most newspapers. They say that advertising monies are shifting towards “cause related marketing” and away from all but the very top sports stars.

The challenge for us is to provide “professional, value for money” to sponsors. It is not good enough to say to a sponsor “Well we’ll just whack a proudly sponsored by sign up in front of an exhibit” and expect hundreds of thousands of dollars in sponsorship monies to roll in.

It needs to be a partnership, an ongoing relationship which is well planned and mutually beneficial.

### **SUMMARY**

These are some of the challenges I see for today and into the future. Now I know I have probably upset some of the purists and die-hard tree huggers, but let’s face it, unless the money comes from somewhere such as tourists or drip feed from Govt, we will not survive.

As advised previously, CWS has now commenced a consultancy to zoos and Wildlife Tourism Operators which will add real value to businesses. If interested, please give me a call.