Protected areas and development in arid Australia – challenges to regional tourism

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Abstract. The principal contention of this paper is that the traditional approach to park management is inadequate to deal with the contemporary goals of protected areas, in particular, biodiversity conservation, cultural heritage management and the management of socio-economic development within parks. This is particularly true for parks in remote regions like Central Australia, where management on a broader scale is required. The benefits of park management embracing a regional approach to development and conservation are examined. This paper also identifies some serious restrictions to development. Parks rely heavily on abstract management plans, and do not have a transparent framework through which to set objectives and targets. These objectives would allow parks to evaluate their organisation’s performance. Iconic landscape assets dominate the tourism economy in Central Australia. The number of different institutions managing parks has hampered the establishment of a valuation framework. This framework would allow regional resource allocation decisions to be assessed and parks’ performances to be monitored. Proper assessment and monitoring would strengthen the case for additional park funding to pursue conservation and development responsibilities.

Additional keywords: Central Australia, economic development, institutional governance, parks, valuation framework.

Introduction

Tourism is a vital component of the Central Australian economy. Central Australia boasts a large number of significant attractions and symbols of the outback which attract many visitors. The contribution parks make to the economy through tourism is clearly recognised in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts (DNREA) asserts that ‘nowhere in Australia are tourism, national parks and the economy more closely linked’ (DNREA 2005). Research on tourism in parks also confirms the importance of parks’ contributions to remote and regional economies (DNREA 2005; Tremblay and Carson 2007). However, park managers generally concentrate on their conventional responsibilities for ecological and sometimes cultural conservation and the provision of basic visitor services.

The first part of this paper briefly examines new trends in academic writing which question the relationships between protected areas and tourism and regional development. The second part of this paper presents an argument for modifying the way that protected areas are managed in order to address the issues identified. The third part discusses proposals for improving the management of parks and tourism in Central Australia and points out some challenges. In this paper the terms ‘park’ and ‘protected area’ are used inter-changeably, although they do have specific technical meanings in international literature on the topic.

Part I: Recent developments in international attitudes to protected areas

International organisations involved in park management, biodiversity conservation and academic research have influenced the public’s conception of the role of protected areas in Australia and elsewhere. This section discusses emerging issues that have increased the influence of tourism and economic development over park management practices.

Tourism, protected areas and funding

The most persistent challenge to park management is arguably the handling of changing, and often competing, stakeholder values. Tourism is often considered a relative newcomer in the park management mix. Industrialised tourism makes growing demands on park resources for infrastructure, visitor services and marketing. Parks also need specialised capabilities to deal with the natural, social and cultural impacts that result from industrialised tourism. However, park management has been slow to recognise the potential contribution tourism could make towards park revenues.

Eagles (2003) states that Canadian parks have historically been managed through centralised budgets and tended to focus on upper-level bureaucrats as their chief stakeholders. This prevented them from displaying more initiative to seek funding from alternative sources. The increase in the number of parks globally coincides with dwindling budgets. This makes it more difficult for parks to meet expanding park objectives, and has reinforced park managers’ reluctance to deal with tourism. Further, some stakeholders see tourism as an undesirable intruder into protected areas. This is despite the fact that when parks were first created in the western world, recreation was as fundamental an objective as conservation (Eagles and McCool 2002).

In a broad-ranging analysis of parks as institutions, Eagles (1995, 2003) identifies funding as the most significant systemic
threat to protected areas achievement of their conventional objectives. He sees tourism as being the inevitable way that funds, which are diminishing in most jurisdictions, will be found, although not all parks have equal tourism potential. The availability of park visits has become greater than the demand of ‘willing-to-pay’ tourists. This suggests that there will be a decreasing return on investments in the marketing of tourism in any single park, despite the increasing dependence of many park authorities on tourism revenues. Individual parks have different relationships with tourist markets and can call on different kinds of human resource pools for visitor management and operations skills. As a result parks have uneven potentials to generate income from tourism (Wearing and Bowden 1999).

A small number of iconic parks inevitably attract a very large share of all tourist visitors to protected areas. There is a need to recognise the interdependence of parks and strategically manage their cross-subsidisation (Eagles 1995; Tremblay 2006, 2007). This is an opportunity to increase the scale of funds available for tourism infrastructure and marketing. It also emphasises the importance of bringing together protected area strategic management and tourism destination planning. Unfortunately, protected areas have generally been hesitant to embrace this move despite its potential to deliver more sustainable funding to parks.

From planning park objectives to governance for complexity

Park management literature has a distinguished history in North America. It describes a great array of planning and operational frameworks. These frameworks provide methods to manage multiple uses (such as conservation, biodiversity, recreation and tourism) when there is a reasonable degree of agreement on priorities for uses and non-uses (Eagles et al. 2002). In reality, contemporary park management is rarely so simple. Park managers struggle to appraise and prioritise the values of their stakeholders (Child 2004a; Cumming 2004). In recent decades park managers’ duties have expanded and forced them to take responsibility for matters far beyond the simple operational matters park bureaucracies were originally created to deal with (Dearden and Rollins 1993; Eagles and McCool 2002; Cumming 2004). In the 1980s, when parks moved to streamline management principles, they had to formulate visioning exercises to bridge the considerable gap between policy and management. This led to what are commonly referred to as park ‘management plans’ today. These plans have generally become the main tools that park authorities use to determine their broad goals. They range from mere ‘policy documents’ to more substantial and precise sets of intended or even operational actions (Eagles et al. 2002).

Commenting on the role of management plans, Eagles and McCool (2002) argue that they are useful approaches to planning when the operating environment is somewhat stable, and there is sufficient agreement on the importance of competing goals. They state that instead, present-day park managers often face ‘messy’ situations characterised by little social agreement on desired goals, and little scientific agreement on cause-effect relationships. Eagles and McCool (2002) emphasise that park managers are not ignorant of the interconnected character of park planning, or the complexity of identifying constituencies, but they adhere to the perceived need to set and defend planning priorities in order to conform with politically-determined funding cycles.

Parks and the people

Debates about the relationship between protected areas and their stakeholders inevitably correspond with wide-ranging discussions about the increasing complexity of park planning. Although stakeholder management has traditionally been seen by parks as a political and public relations obligation, international expert opinions have shifted towards considering parks’ responsibilities for broader economic and social goals. It is currently being debated whether there should be a role for protected areas, as post-colonial institutions, to set poverty-reduction objectives in regions where poverty is significant. It is also being considered whether protected areas are responsible for providing property (or management) rights to populations either dislodged, or constrained in some way, by the existence of parks (Barrow and Fabricius 2002). This relatively recent outlook is widespread and can be roughly summarised by the following propositions.

1. Managers of protected areas must consider their impact on, and the objectives of, areas outside their geographical boundaries in their overall planning. Traditionally those in charge of managing protected areas were located in affluent countries and treated social and economic objectives as secondary. They generally focused on direct regional employment (Wearing and Bowden 1999). Only recently have protected areas seen their claims for further funding linked to their capacity to demonstrate more subtle contributions to regional development, especially to settlements located inside their immediate boundaries, or culturally connected with them (Jobes 1991). An ‘emerging understanding of protected areas’ considers the benefits which could be contributed to poor communities (Borrini-Feyerabend et al. 2004). It focuses on the value of resources found in parks to stakeholders, and the possibility of mitigating any negative impacts related to a park’s existence (Barrow and Fabricius 2002; Neto 2003). This has led to widespread endorsement of co-management principles to ensure that protected areas contribute concrete benefits to locals.

2. The notion of separation between natural and cultural life, which has permeated the Western idea of ‘wilderness’ and served as an ideological platform for numerous interest groups closely linked to early park movements, has been increasingly questioned. There are compelling arguments that the separation of societal development and conservation policies has harmed efforts to maintain biodiversity (Folke 2006). Recently, the idea of island-parks (or ‘fortress conservation’) has been rejected for overlooking the role and incentives of communities surrounding parks in sustaining ecological security (Barrow and Fabricius 2002; West and Brockington 2006). An ethical dimension is added when it is acknowledged that the removal of Aboriginal people from their land to create parks has produced a rupture in their special relationships to land (Adams and Mulligan 2003; West and Brockington 2006). In reaction to the
so-called ‘Yellowstone model’ of exclusion, commentators have made claims that spiritual associations with land prevent Aboriginal stakeholders from participating in, or even complying with, western-style ‘wilderness conservation’.

(3) Cultural responsibilities linked with tourism require new, comprehensive kinds of interpretation programs to mitigate potential impacts. These new demands make a considerable addition to park management responsibilities and requirements for expertise (McAvoy 2002). Park managers who are already under pressure, are ill-equipped to deal with conflicts emerging from spiritual and cultural values (Stevens 1997; McAvoy 2002; Muller 2003). However, cultural heritage-based tourism offers new marketing opportunities if appropriately managed and valued (Wearing and Bowden 1999; Barrow and Fabricius 2002).

The considerations summarised above have provided a motivation to develop new institutions designed specifically to protect cultural or Aboriginal heritage. For instance, co-management models have recently been developed to manage landscapes with diverse stakeholder groups, who have complex relationships to that land (Wearing and Huyskens 2001; Muller 2003).

Part II: Scale and evaluation – changing the strategic management of protected areas

This section argues that, to address contemporary park objectives with the financial and management constraints cited above, protected areas need to undertake an institutional shift. It also addresses the concern that protected areas should contribute towards the development of the communities whose resources they impact on or control. The institutional shift required can be characterised by two propositions regarding the scale at which strategic governance of protected areas needs to be undertaken, and the importance of evaluation of the park’s management process. These propositions mainly apply to protected areas located in remote areas like the Australian rangelands.

Shifting to a broader scale

Too much focus has been placed on discrete park entities in the past, rather than on broader regions encompassing many parks and co-existing land tenure systems. That has made it difficult for many protected areas to achieve their strategic goals, and has discouraged genuine economic development. Three arguments which support the ‘scale proposition’ are summarised below.

(1) Many ecologists are concerned that policies have become fragmented. They feel that park planning ought to be viewed as one element in a regional ecosystem. This would allow park goals to be matched with the scale of the resources and ecological processes they interact with (Briggs 2001). Many authors have expanded Holling and Meffe’s (1996) critique of the ‘command and control’ approach to establish links between ecological processes, human intervention and the study of organisations that implement policies. Holling and Meffe (1996) describe the limitations of narrow bureaucratic thinking to address ecosystem-wide issues. These issues require large-scale, coordinated incentives, inside and outside protected areas (e.g. in relation to animal migration, invasive species and fire management).

(2) The importance of protected areas to regional tourism, and the potential contribution of tourism to park incomes, creates an interdependency that calls for a strategic regional outlook rather than one limited to park entities. Park planning at a regional scale would make allocation of tourism-related resources more efficient. It would allow product differentiation across parks and price discrimination of park access fees. This approach is likely to become more relevant as protected areas increasingly compete to attract tourists; only a relatively small number of iconic places can play strategic roles as tourism and economic development drivers (Eagles 1995; Tremblay 2006). It can be argued that from a tourism viewpoint there is an excess supply of protected areas, and that funding for tourism is in need of rationalisation. The development of viable nature tourism enterprises, and the provision of socio-economic benefits to people surrounding or inhabiting parks, largely depends on the development of a strategic approach to managing tourism resources. This approach should incorporate some degree of park profiling and specialisation. The establishment of strategic tourism centres based on iconic tourism assets is a political choice that can be justified. Savings and economic benefits from this kind of clustering must be measured and re-distributed across the region to achieve social and economic goals. An institutional framework should be designed to allocate an optimal concentration of tourism resources to encourage global parks competition and regional tourism infrastructure efficiency. Examples of efficient practices at the regional level include avoiding infrastructure duplication, investing in coordinated regional park branding, and maintaining visitor services standards. Other important elements of regional tourism competitiveness include avoiding the duplication of ‘tourist experiences’ (this also ensures regional tourism sustainability), ensuring product consistency, and supplying and marketing a coherent ‘sense of place’ (LEBCG 2004; Tremblay 2006).

(3) An explicit ‘landscape’ approach to protected area management has recently been developed in international parks theory. This approach attempts to integrate the physical, ecological and human aspects of places within and around protected areas, with the aim of establishing a balance between conservation values and appropriate uses, and to sustain that balance through landscape-wide planning principles (Brown et al. 2004; Phillips 2004). The approach provides a useful framework, but despite its attractiveness, has not been used much to formulate policy. This may be due to the fact that ‘landscape has usually been seen as a second class member of the environmental club (in part because) lacking a coherent philosophy, thin on quantification and without a strong, unified disciplinary core’ (Phillips 2004).

Parks literature has recently given considerable attention to the classification of protected areas, usually based on the World Conservation Union (IUCN) system. This system is broadly regarded as relevant to parks in Australia. An official statement has also been made that the ‘planning and management of protected areas must be incorporated within
Adopting explicit target-based performance evaluation

A second contention of this paper is that parks need to adopt a mechanism to measure demonstrable achievements rather than broad principles. Parks need to identify regional ‘values’ and assess the success and failure of park land use in conforming to those values. Protected areas face a major planning challenge to convincingly demonstrate the validity of their decisions for the use and non-use of their resources. From an economic viewpoint, the existence of a protected area depends on its ability to demonstrate that the sum of values (the tangible and intangible uses and non-uses) associated with its conservation is greater than the next best alternative use of the land. The ongoing fiscal management of parks must take into account the amount provided by parks to maintain these use and non-use values. Decisions relating to prices, and investments in necessary infrastructure, require performance evaluations of a park’s success in achieving its objectives.

In regions that are economically dependent on tourism, parks are obliged to demonstrate their contribution to tourism infrastructure, and must justify the provision of adequate levels of tourism-related funding. Investments in regional ‘tourism info structure’ provide data that can track the evolution of a region’s tourist market, and helps design strategies to create sustainable tourism. Parks can play significant roles as attractions, as infrastructure, as accommodation providers and as tourism product coordinators, and should be expected to contribute to the pool of common intelligence on competitive advantage grounds, especially for nature tourism destinations (Wearing and Bowden 1999). Protected areas are often responsible for the management of important natural and cultural heritage in regions where many livelihoods are dependant on tourism. The protected areas should, therefore, be obliged to provide evidence of their role in the conservation and development of the region.

Few protected areas establish clear connections between desired outcomes and performance, and several park management system analysts have recently recognised this as a major limitation. Eagles et al. (2002) argue that protected area ‘management plans’ have been an almost universal response by parks to former ad hoc resource allocation practices. These plans have become the main channel for setting goals that conform with the interests of the many stakeholders that protected areas are expected to consult (by law or bureaucratic guidelines). The large proportion of management resources that park authorities around the world have invested in their visioning processes seems disproportionate when contrasted with the few documented efforts that have been made to set transparent and measurable objectives. Schmolldt and Peterson (2001) have acknowledged that the reason that parks usually have no formal process for prioritising projects is because ‘plans are often lengthy and cumbersome, because of efforts to make them comprehensive’. As a result the actions they intend to implement are extremely vague.

Cumming’s (2004) analysis of Southern Africa highlights a historical situation of protected area managers seeing the number of objectives they need to address expanding to an unmanageable degree. This includes the more recent goal of providing economic and social benefits. Dearden and Rollins (1993) portray a similar situation in Canada, where protected area managers deal with an increasingly complex set of stakeholders: early entrepreneurs successively replaced by recreationists, environmentalists, and eventually Aboriginal people. This ultimately prevents a clear appraisal of the agency’s success.

Cumming (2004) also found that the data needed to assess parks is either not available or non-existent. He regards this in itself as ‘a serious indictment of existing park management’. His own idiosyncratic appraisal of the Southern African region is bleak even with respect to the most basic conservation objectives. In a rare attempt to use empirical evidence rather than ideology, he demonstrates through inter-regional comparisons across park systems that island-parks have performed poorly, especially if they fail to include regional perspectives in their plans. His main claim is that transparent performance evaluation is not possible because there is an absence of targets linked with park agency objectives, and an excessive reliance on management plans that incorporate many potentially contradictory statements of good intent. The aspirational elements of management plans are justified by the great complexity of the natural and human systems within protected areas; however, the inability of park authorities to complete the process and include ‘value accountability’, or produce ‘implementable plans’ makes them less accountable, and provides a partial explanation for funding reductions (Child 2004b).

Child (2004b) repeats that the absence of links between performance, targets and resource allocation creates a cycle of inefficiencies that is likely to encourage socially inappropriate conservation philosophies. He places part of the blame on park institutions’ fixation with attempting to control the resources found within their boundaries. Child thinks it would be preferable for parks to foster property rights regimes, which would permit alternative uses (and non-uses) of resources, and allow communities to choose the nature of their relationships to land on the basis of regional values (Child 2004b). Cumming (2004, p. 122) concurs, and finds park plans rigid and impractical in a context of divergent objectives:

‘We need to understand why so many park plans either remain unimplemented, or after a year or two of enthusiastic adoption are quietly shelved and forgotten. I suggest that this pattern reflects, in large measure, a conflict between a blueprint management model and the reality of dealing with complex systems.’

Part III: Institutional change for protected areas in Central Australia

An emphasis is placed on the link between parks, tourism and economic development in Central Australia, although there are few documented attempts to investigate the contributions of protected areas to the regional economy. It is disquieting that so few efforts have been made to establish strategic connections between iconic tourism assets and the institutions that manage resources in the region. For example, community and industry observers have long recognised that the relationship between Uluru and Alice Springs (neighbouring tourism subregions) is ‘problematic’, and in need of urgent attention (Chlanda 2004).
However, no efforts to explore the causes or possible solutions are on the public record. A few concealed political statements have been made about the institutional divisions between the key drivers of the tourism economy in the region. These key drivers include: the Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park (UKTNP) (managed by the Commonwealth of Australia in collaboration with traditional owners); the privately managed, but Northern Territory Government-backed, Yulara resort; the increasingly tourism-branded West MacDonnell landscape (linked with the Northern Territory Parks service and traditional owners); and the heterogeneous Alice Springs community itself.

No research has been specifically directed towards examining the responsibility park governance might have for the disconnection between Uluru and the socio-economic welfare of the region. It has been reported in an Alice Springs newspaper that there are no jobs for the Aboriginal residents of the Mutitjulu settlement at the Ayers Rock Resort (Chlanda 2002, 2004), but few have commented on the striking and deplorable discrepancy between the very high level of regional investment and tourist spending in Central Australia, and the living conditions in some of the surrounding settlements. The combination of the separate governance of parks, their extremely narrow geographical focus, and the control they exercise over key tourism assets, creates a significant economic blockage within the region.

It must be acknowledged that it cannot be proven that parks’ existing institutional frameworks are responsible for unfavourable outcomes for the region, because both the data, and an acceptable regional economic valuation framework, are missing. This is, in fact, one of park management’s failings. There is so much concern about the poor economic prospects of some Aboriginal settlements in the region, and indeed alarm about their welfare, that there is an obligation on the bureaucracies controlling parks to demonstrate that their assets are properly managed. The following proposals should be further researched in future in order to improve park management in this iconic desert region.

**The need for a greater focus on economic development (and tourism)**

The basic contention that goals for conservation and socio-economic development within protected areas should be integrated has been discussed earlier. Most management plans for Central Australian parks present tourism as an important economic driver, and see it as an opportunity for gateway and Aboriginal settlements. However, concerns about the potential cultural impacts of tourism development (in the case of UKTNP), or undesirable effects on biodiversity (in the case of Northern Territory Parks), typically dominate parks’ attitudes towards tourism. This guarded approach to tourism ultimately means relatively few resources are allocated towards visitor services and product development (Commonwealth of Australia 2000; see also DNREA 2005).

A more balanced perspective on the impact of tourism is possible if one contrasts its relatively modest pressure on the environment with the extreme threats to biodiversity (and cultural life) of challenges such as climate change, fire management and introduced species invasions, which affect protected areas at the landscape scale (e.g. Tremblay 2008). It is also constructive to consider Brake’s (1988) assertion that ‘tourism in arid lands must be seen by the conservation resource managers to be an important part of the solution not just part of the problem’. He unambiguously states that ‘the Australian Outback will never be loved to death’. This is in contrast with beliefs in the 1980s that tourism is one of the most significant threats to the environment in arid regions. Brake said that coastal city dwellers’ culture of ‘ignorance and apathy’ (with their own indirect impact on resource allocation) has a more serious indirect contribution to land degradation and undesirable cultural impacts in the outback and suggested that apprehensions about local tourism impacts are overstated.

In contrast, tourism academics have been captivated by the cultural management dilemmas associated with ‘climbing the Rock’, and see Uluru tourism as a cultural laboratory, where the views of tourists, the tourism industry, traditional owners and park managers interact (McKercher and du Cros 1998; Du Cros and Johnston 2002; Robinson et al. 2003; Shackley 2004). Like numerous ethnologists before them (and park managers more recently), these authors point out significant differences in the way visitors and traditional occupants of the land view the spiritual meaning and symbolism of the act of climbing Uluru. They simplistically conclude their observations by establishing crude divergences between the ‘culturally sensitive’ park agency, focused on cultural tourism or ecotourists, and the tourism industry, concerned with mass tourists and the bottom line. Again, it seems fair to note that the attention given to that issue is exaggerated, especially when considering the health, education, poverty and self-determination predicaments reportedly affecting surrounding Aboriginal settlements. It seems particularly incongruous that so much attention has been given to visitors’ feelings about cultural respect, while so few efforts have been made to connect investments in Central Australia with benefits that could legitimise tourism developments in the first place. In that context, it is important to investigate the nature of the institutional arrangements that facilitate or prevent the calculation and diffusion of social and economic benefits in the region (Smyth 2001). If Uluru is indeed a contested space where Australian identity is negotiated (Waitt et al. 2007), recent academic debates seem to have concentrated too heavily on its packaging for the marketing of Australia’s image overseas. They miss the basic question of whether surrounding communities are able to earn economic rent from the tourism industry in return for the exploitation of their region.

**The importance of managing protected areas in Central Australia at a regional scale**

The second proposition is that the separate management of parks in Central Australia (both in terms of levels of government and in terms of discrete management of parks by a government) has hindered development in that region. Inconsistent approaches to the management of core tourism assets, as well as marketing and funding policies obstruct the establishment of resource allocation mechanisms that could help to build a coordinated ‘tourism destination system’ capable of providing sustainable benefits to the region. For example, several tourism academics and park managers view Uluru as a niche ‘cultural tourism’ destination. They assert this on the basis that this use is consistent with the
wishes of the immediate traditional owners. They do not address the fact that the Uluru-Yulara nexus is a prime mass tourism destination. Uluru is a major tourism icon, and a chief regional economic driver indirectly affecting the economies of many settlements and regional centres in the surrounding area. Many people who inhabit this region hold similarly legitimate cultural or spiritual links with the site, and make claims to it and its surrounding region.

From a regional tourism planning viewpoint, the landscape is the fundamental tourist attraction. It is a multi-faceted resource that must be strategically managed at an appropriate spatial scale. Secondary data originating from tourist surveys in Central Australia suggests a very high degree of interdependence between protected areas located close to each other. As could be expected, the data show that the main reason for visiting the region is Uluru’s iconic image (for visitors with limited knowledge), or the overall regional landscape (for those returning or more informed). The growing popularity of day visits to Watarrka National Park can be best explained by complementary regional investments and the park’s convenience, rather than the appeal of its specific attributes as such. This makes the direct tourism value of Watarrka National Park seem very small, in fact exaggeratedly so (Tremblay and Carson 2007). However, this simply illustrates that making an economic valuation of Watarrka National Park as a discrete entity is unworkable and inappropriate, as the park cannot be separated from the ‘Central Australian landscape experience’.

It shows that it is not possible to establish the funding requirements (even for tourism alone) for such a discrete park in the context of that region, unless the whole region’s landscape is valued, and its components subsequently prioritised.

The major implication is that poorly resourced protected areas, which play varying roles in a tourism destination, need to be managed coherently in order to contribute fully to the regional economy. If a park’s funding is connected to its regional role (e.g. conservation, economic development), strategic tiers within regions could permit park differentiation through coordinated infrastructure and marketing policies. Such an approach could be defended as a regional investment, if a competitive advantage could be demonstrated for tourism managed on a regional basis.

Important park-based tourism institutions in Central Australia (including UKTNP, Parks and Wildlife Northern Territory, Yulara Resort and the town and service centre of Alice Springs) possess fragmented planning horizons and a degree of ideological rivalry that has limited the integration of their concerns (Chlanda 2002, 2004). This has resulted in an atmosphere of distrust and secrecy, and strengthens perceptions that the chief regional economic asset is not managed in a way that suits the region itself. The historical conflict between explicitly pro-tourism development policies in the Northern Territory, and rival views (sometimes originating from Canberra), have created a situation where UKTNP has effectively become an ‘enclave’ operated separately from the rest of the park system, and at arm’s length from Alice Springs. In international parks literature UKTNP is often seen as a role model for its implementation of joint management ideals, and its outlook on cultural heritage issues, but it is strategically disconnected from the region it dominates. The park is impervious to regional policies. Extremely little is known (or made available to the public) about the links between the local economy and this quasi-monopoly in the desert. A framework must be designed to calculate the income derived from tourism and retained in the region, and the economic benefits that could be gained by management on a regional scale, otherwise continued investment in tourism in the region risks being inadequate or even counter-productive.

The need to set and monitor performance targets

The many claims that parks in the Central Australian region contribute to the local economy are unsubstantiated. The UKTNP for instance, identifies many kinds of economic roles for itself but does not attempt to set priorities. Its plan refers to operations ‘in harmony with Australian social and economic aspirations’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2000). It also refers to its responsibilities towards Central Australian tourism operators who depend on Uluru (Commonwealth of Australia 2000); for providing direct benefits (mainly through employment); to undertake ‘exploration’ for new business opportunities in the arts and tourism (Commonwealth of Australia 2000); and to support traditional hunting and gathering by its closest stakeholders (Commonwealth of Australia 2000). The management plan does not commit park management to undertake any specific initiatives, even in relation to the Mutitjulu settlement that is enclosed within the park’s limits, nor does it suggest how its impacts or performance could be assessed at the end of a strategic cycle.

In contrast to the abstract statements found in parks plans of management, Altman’s (1987a, 1987b, 1989) work related to tourism focuses explicitly on the relationship between remote Aboriginal settlements and protected areas. He assesses the economic merits and the possible appeal of alternative sources of income for Aboriginal people in a hybrid economy that incorporates elements of market, state and customary systems. He highlights the dilemma created by dependence on tourism on Aboriginal land when Aboriginal people have a preference for indirect relationships to tourism. He notes that this preference, combined with a lack of any feasible economic alternatives in many remote settlements, could have social and economic costs because there are also declining opportunities to participate in customary pursuits. His studies portray a fairly widespread situation in which the commercial benefits of tourism are likely to be positive, but generally low. When the returns are compared with the potentially substantial, and difficult-to-measure, non-market costs of direct participation in tourism (e.g. interference with customary activities, loss of economic freedom, loss of privacy), this option is an unappealing foundation for economic development in remote Aboriginal settlements. Altman (1989) does recognise that within the Aboriginal population (even within homogeneous cultural groups and settlements), there is a diversity of attitudes towards tourism. However, he suggests that the governance costs, the potential conflicts arising from decisions about the most appropriate forms of involvement with tourism, the desire to retain control over land use and the difficulty of establishing marketing partnerships with the tourism industry is likely to prohibit the development of tourism enterprises.

Most of Altman’s studies involve a single settlement connected to a specific icon (e.g. Uluru Kata-Tjuta, Cobourg Peninsula, Kakadu, Bungle Bungles) overlaid with a discrete
protected area. This is the established discrete park tourism model. It is understandable that traditional owners in these settlements resent being locked into lease-back arrangements that they often had not negotiated in the first place (Smyth 2001). They are also surrounded by a non-Aboriginal tourism industry that is accruing most of the visible commercial benefits from the arrangement. This partly explains why the Aboriginal people interviewed were particularly concerned about retaining their rights in relation to customary activities. The concept of tourism is very unappealing to Aboriginal people who are concerned about its likely impact on their culture.

Institutional change could help overcome this barrier to the development of tourism if genuine property rights were created in tourism resources (suggested by Dillon 1987). Altman’s discouraging assessment of tourism for Aboriginal settlements may be bounded by political and institutional realism; however, this paper aims to propose reasonable changes to institutional structures in order to make it possible for diverse stakeholders to negotiate the nature of their participation in the tourism industry. It is possible to conceive of an arrangement at the regional scale, where communities and interest groups can maximise the amount of money they receive from the use, or preservation, of their key natural and cultural assets. This kind of arrangement would allow settlements to place high value on their privacy and customary activities, and also offer opportunities for local entrepreneurship and experimentation with tourism projects that aim to develop the regional economy.

A coherent valuation framework that presents clear trade-offs is required to permit individuals, communities and regions to make informed decisions under these proposed arrangements. The previous section illustrated that shifting park planning to a different spatial scale needs to be accompanied by a shift in the emphasis of park governance. Attention and resources must be moved from management plans that make statements of principle, towards targets and performance assessments. Mechanisms need to be formulated to allow the regional park institutions that control resource use to make adequate levels of funding available to settlements that launch tourism initiatives. It would be possible to develop target categories in Central Australia that are similar to those used by Canadian park agencies. Their target categories have a hierarchy of strata that incorporate performance indicators and measurements of conservation, tourism and economic development (Zealand et al. 2006; Eagles et al. 2007).

Several initiatives have recently been announced for Central Australia that conform with the proposals suggested above, although the details of these initiatives are not yet known. They include the Northern Territory Government’s proposal for a ‘Greater Central Australian National Park’ which promises a shift towards a more appropriate spatial scale. The proposal explicitly states that an extensive tourism destination should be created with re-branded boundaries in order to deliver a greater diversity of tourist ‘experiences’ based on the regional landscape. Public announcements also declare a desire to extend the economic base of surrounding Aboriginal settlements; to expand four-wheel-drive routes; and to capture regional biological and cultural values, by supporting efforts to obtain World Heritage Area listing for the MacDonnell Ranges (DNREA 2005). It is not known whether the MacDonnell Ranges could challenge the domination of Uluru; however, World Heritage listing would probably have a limited impact considering the global oversupply of protected areas (from a tourism viewpoint), and the ongoing erosion of the value of World Heritage branding.

These changes to the scale of management are necessary, but urgently need to be accompanied by a matching performance assessment system (and data gathering strategy) to ensure that the management objectives can be scrutinised and properly resourced. There are significant risks that such a regional initiative could be dominated by a conventional conservation outlook, disconnected from regional stakeholders, insufficiently funded, or trapped into a competition between park systems. A transparent mechanism to prioritise park objectives, and a clear process to evaluate achievements and failures, is required. This will ensure that regional park management is not perceived as a cynical attempt to centrally control the tourism economy and avoid conflicts over land use. It could be argued that having two park systems notionally benefits the Northern Territory by channelling more funds into the region; however, it is impossible to establish who has benefited from this situation, how much has been retained in the region, and which park objectives have been fulfilled.

Other significant institutional changes planned for Northern Territory protected areas include the implementation of joint management in a majority of Northern Territory parks (where traditional owners have accepted the Government’s conditions). This plan aims to resolve Aboriginal Land Rights and Native Title claims over Territory parks and reserves through negotiation rather than litigation. It is unclear if this new framework will create a different basis for resource allocation and decision-making for development. The exercise could play a mainly symbolic role if the power relationships between the parties are too asymmetrical. It has been alleged that this imbalance has existed in similar situations in the past (Altman 1987b; Smyth 2001).

Conclusion

Despite the noble goals that are declared in management plans for protected areas, these plans may not contribute much to the capacity of parks to fulfil their roles in the conservation and socio-economic development of Central Australia. The failure of parks to embody the ideals found in international literature on park management, and the practical difficulty of assessing the performance of park institutions, reveal profound problems with park management, in particular a failure to incorporate contemporary social, cultural and economic goals.

This paper focuses specifically on the significant role parks and tourism can play in regional economies, and the additional funding they can create for overall park objectives. Significant institutional change is required to produce widespread benefits, and to address the disharmony between the major players in the Central Australian tourism region in particular. Fragmented and inappropriate protected area management is at least partially responsible for the tensions between the key tourism centres in Central Australia.

Park management also fails to provide economic information or performance indicators to assess their ability to deliver the benefits that parks were created to provide. This paper points out
the institutional rigidities that have created these problems, the inappropriate scale at which park management is conducted, and the absence of monitoring systems. Institutional reform is required to address the increasingly perceived gap between tourist inflows and their limited contributions towards regional standards of living. A better valuation framework, that operates on a useful scale and establishes relevant targets, could overcome obstructions to funding, and ensure conservation and economic development objectives in Central Australia are realised.

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