

The Natural State: Nature-Based Tourism and Ecotourism Accreditation in Tasmania, Australia

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ABSTRACT. Australian nature-based tourism and ecotourism have become popular forms of recreational activity. Tasmania attracts twice the Australian national average number of nature-based tourists and ecotourists (thirty per cent). The growth of this tourism sector has prompted measures to ensure that experiences are of high quality, and that environmental impacts are adequately managed. ISO 14000 is an environmental management and certification system often utilised as an environmental management system standard within various industries, but has not been widely applied to the Australian tourism industry. The Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) represents the most significant accreditation measure within Australia at present. This paper assesses the relevance of NEAP in the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry through in-depth interviews with a key informant group and a comparative analysis of interview data. The paper introduces nature-based tourism and ecotourism definitions and discusses the growing relevance of ecotourism accreditation. The paper argues that NEAP is relevant to the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry, where the quality of the natural environment forms the central

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focus for such experiences. Furthermore, the paper argues that NEAP can assist in supporting the State's nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry through means such as branding and promotion. However, problems exist in relation to financial issues between NEAP and operators, and the perceived overlap of NEAP with the widely implemented Tourism Council Tasmania Accreditation Program. Thus, financial issues need to be addressed by the Ecotourism Association of Australia in association with Australian Commonwealth Government subsidisation. The degree of overlap between the two programs can be effectively addressed through industry cooperation. The paper also suggests that stronger branding and promotion of NEAP can be achieved through increased industry involvement by Tourism Tasmania. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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INTRODUCTION

Australia is amongst the ten most popular tourist destinations in the world with tourism representing a significant commercial sector for employment, export earnings and regional development (CDoT, 1998). In 1997, tourism export earnings in Australia were \$16.5 billion, representing 13 per cent of Australia's total export earnings, with tourism consistently exceeding earnings from more traditional export commodities such as wool and meat (CDoT, 1998).

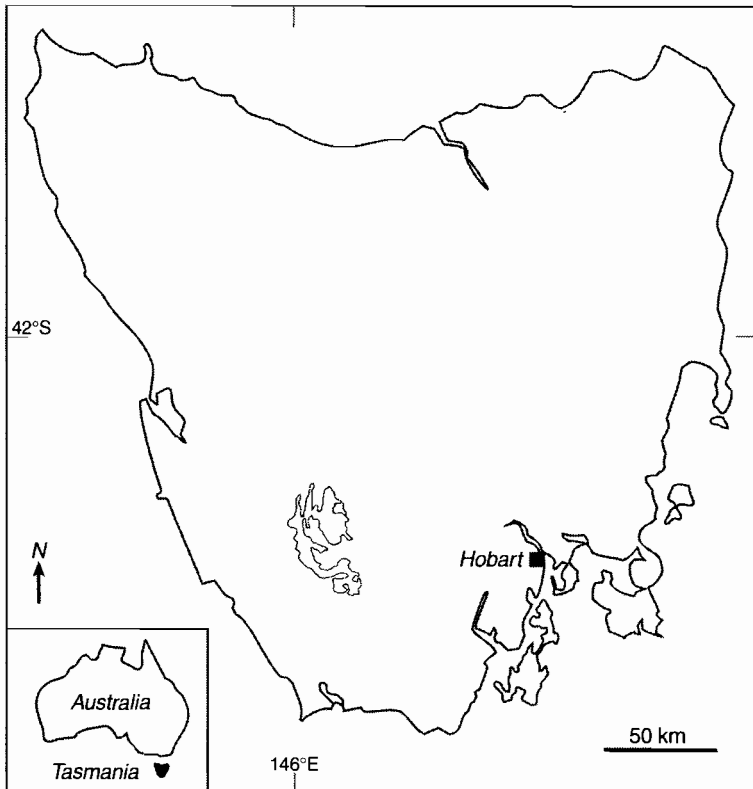
The fastest growing segment and a significant sub-category of the Australian tourism industry is ecotourism and nature-based tourism, a sector that has become increasingly popular. The Ecotourism Association of Australia (EAA) (EAA, 2000: 4) states that "nature-based tourism is ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas" and ecotourism as "ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that fosters environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation" (EAA, 2000: 4).

The recent and rapid growth of the nature-based tourism and ecotourism sector has gained the interest of a wide range of parties in

Australia, including all levels of government, tourism industry associations, non-profit associations, professional societies, state based conservation councils and the media. This attention has resulted in tourism operators labelling their ventures as ecotourism, in an attempt to capture a segment of the increasing number of tourists seeking “environmental tourism experiences.” The island state of Tasmania (Figure 1) represents an emerging destination for visitors seeking nature-based and ecotourism experiences.

Tasmania boasts more than 40 per cent of its area in national parks and World Heritage Areas, and therefore claims significant and unique examples of wilderness and natural areas. The island State has twice the Australian national average number of nature-based tourists and

FIGURE 1. Location of Tasmania



ecotourists (30 per cent). Thus, the natural environment of Tasmania is recognised as a significant asset, which forms the core component of the State's tourism products, branding and marketing. Hence, Tasmania has gained the reputation of "Australia's Natural State" and as the majority of nature-based tourism and ecotourism occurs in Tasmania's protected areas, it is imperative that the impacts associated with such experiences are pre-empted, mitigated and managed in this sector.

Due to the rapid growth and demand of the nature-based tourism and ecotourism market, as well as an increased global awareness of environmental issues and problems, there has recently been a strong push for regulatory mechanisms applicable to this sector of tourism. Regulatory mechanisms such as accreditation have been suggested as enabling the principles of nature-based tourism and ecotourism to be upheld and to improve the image of the industry. Nature-based tourism and ecotourism accreditation endeavours to achieve environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial, and economically viable management, by accrediting operators according to internationally, nationally, and regionally agreed principles and criteria (Richardson, 1994). Furthermore, the process of accreditation represents a means of establishing standards and providing a competitive edge in marketing of a nature-based tourism or ecotourism product.

The objective of this paper is to assess the relevance of the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (NEAP) to the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry. The paper begins by comparing and contrasting definitions of nature-based tourism and ecotourism. The concept and growing relevance of ecotourism accreditation is introduced and briefly compared with ISO 14000. The NEAP program and its successful utilisation in Australia and the Tasmanian status of NEAP implementation are then discussed. The research process adopted in examining the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry is introduced along with a discussion of the results obtained. Finally, conclusions are presented on the implementation of NEAP to Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism and suggestions are made about approaches for the future management of the sector.

NATURE-BASED TOURISM AND ECOTOURISM

Nature-based tourism is a form of tourism that relies on the natural environment for the basis of its experiences and can include almost any form of outdoor activity that involves a natural element (Ceballos-

Lascurain, 1996). For example, driving to a scenic mountain lookout, walking through botanical gardens or having a picnic at a waterfall could all be classed as nature-based tourism experiences. However, nature-based tourism does not require any further experience, education or conservation of the natural environment that forms the basis of the particular tourism experience. Therefore, the environmental responsibilities of nature-based tourism extend no further than ensuring that the natural resource continues to be available.

In contrast, the essential and differentiating component of ecotourism is the environment in which ecotourism operates, and thus the quality of the natural environment forms the cornerstone of the industry. Without sensitive and knowledgeable management practices adhering to ecologically sustainable development principles and best practice environmental management, an attraction or destination ceases to be ecotourism, and is just another form of mass tourism, where resources are consumed rather than conserved (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Therefore, ecotourism differs from conventional tourism as it aims to educate tourists, encourage the conservation of the area in which it operates and minimise environmental damage in order to ensure long-term sustainability. However, due to ecotourism's rapidly increasing popularity, there have been cases of ecotourism operating in situations where developers profit from labelling their product as ecotourism whilst the environment suffers (Wight, 1993; Richardson, 1997).

ACCREDITATION: ISO 14000 AND NATURE-BASED/ ECOTOURISM STANDARDS

There has been an increased focus on the relevance of certification, accreditation and professionalism in the tourism industry in recent years (Wearing and Neil, 1999). The growth of accreditation for the tourism industry is being stimulated by tourism industry recognition that consumer's expectations are high and that the market has a much greater awareness of service quality, improved safety and sustainable environmental issues (Issaverdis, 1998). Operators have a financial incentive to conserve the natural resources they use and questions are now being posed as to how this can be best achieved. Accreditation has been suggested as being able to promote the provision of bona fide nature-based tourism and ecotourism and represents a regulatory mechanism for the industry, whereby only genuine operators who adhere to

strict environmental, social and economic criteria are awarded, recognised and promoted.

One particularly well-known standard is ISO 14000, a voluntary environmental management tool developed by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO). Closely related to this standard is ISO 9000 (Quality Management System standards) which has gained broad acceptance and implementation in a wide range of companies across the globe (Jackson, 1997). ISO 14000 claims to provide organisations with strict control over all aspects of their environmental impacts. Organisations compliant with the standard are able to avoid risks and costly mistakes by incorporating environmental controls into daily operations by a consistent and cost-effective means. ISO 14000 is a management system standard, not a performance standard, and therefore is intended to be applicable to firms of all shapes and sizes around the world. The standard does not mandate specific environmental goals, but instead provides a generic framework for organising the tasks necessary for effective environmental management. The framework consists of various components including Environmental Management Systems, Environmental Auditing, Environmental Labelling, and product Life Cycle Assessment.

The ISO 14001 standard describes the requirements for establishing an Environmental Management System, and is the centrepiece of the ISO 14000 series, as companies aiming to gain accreditation under this system must first meet the requirements laid out in ISO 14001. The standard is not prescriptive, and does not state how environmental impacts should best be managed, thus encouraging creative and relevant solutions from the organisation itself (Johnson, 1997; Fredericks & McCallum, 1995). All of the other standards in the ISO 14000 series provide supporting guidance. In brief, there are five environmental management standards, a guide and a set of terms and definitions (Jackson, 1997). There are two discrete types of standards: one dealing with the evaluation of organisations (e.g., ISO 14001, environmental auditing and environmental performance evaluation), and another dealing with the evaluation of the product (e.g., product standards, Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) and Environmental Aspects in Product Standards (EPAS)) (Woodside, Aurricchio & Yturri, 1998). Four years after the official release of the first ISO 14000 Environmental Management System standards, over 21,449 organisations worldwide have already achieved certification to ISO 14001, with the most significant proportion of implementation occurring in Western Europe and Asia.

Comparatively, ISO 14000 is less prescriptive than industry-specific ecotourism accreditation programs, as the latter tends to require set environmental management and resultant outcomes due to the similarity in operation of bona fide ecotourism businesses. Due to the intended application of the program, ISO 14000 is a generic management system for the environmental concerns of a wide range of industries and businesses, and as such, allows for a high degree of interpretation by managers and auditors alike. As ecotourism depends almost solely upon the quality of the surrounding natural environment as its central attraction, it is appropriate that the relevant accreditation systems be specific to the industry with clear and defined environmental outcomes.

The growing recognition within the ecotourism industry, both in Australia and internationally, of the need for minimum standards of operation to ensure commercial sustainability, high quality products and improvement of environmental practices (Issaverdis, 2001) has gradually been leading to more widespread accreditation of ecotourism operators. Eagles (1997) argues that differing ranges of standards has prompted some ecotourism operators and natural resource managers to call for accreditation systems for accommodation, tour guides and field operations that would identify their products in the marketplace, enhance the desirability of products and minimise impact on the natural environment. The WWF (2000) states that such accreditation schemes can play an important role in bringing about more sustainable ecotourism because they provide participating companies with an action plan for improvement, thus fulfilling the demands and expectations of the consumer more effectively.

The Australian Labor Government responded to some of these concerns in 1994, with the implementation of the Australian National Ecotourism Strategy, which, amongst other explicit objectives for the industry, provided a definition of ecotourism accreditation:

Encourages the delivery of high quality, sustainable tourism products and the provision of accurate interpretative services; enhances the reputation of Australian ecotourism in domestic and international markets; acknowledges the use of sustainable practices by ecotourism operators to provide a marketing advantage; and allows natural resource managers to monitor ecotourism operations and guides working within their region. (Allcock et al., 1994: 34)

Furthermore, ecotourism accreditation has been recognised as an effective process for achieving the following objectives:

- eco-efficiency and natural area protection;
- biodiversity protection and minimisation of ecological footprints;
- social aspects of tourism development; and
- economic aspects of tourism development (WWF, 2000).

THE AUSTRALIAN NATURE AND ECOTOURISM ACCREDITATION PROGRAM

Illustrated by international trends in ecotourism accreditation, it can be argued that the Australian Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program is highly regarded by the international ecotourism industry, which may be partially attributed to the fact that at its inception, NEAP was the first ecotourism accreditation program in the world (Crabtree, 2000). Additionally, the Ecotourism Association of Australia represents a peak industry body committed to the success of the program. Since its formation in 1991, the Ecotourism Association of Australia has been involved in discussions regarding ecotourism accreditation (Tourism Queensland, 2000a). The association released *Guidelines for Ecotourists* and the *Code of Practice for Ecotour Operators* in 1992. In 1993 the EAA held a workshop on “Evaluating Ecotourism,” with accreditation as a main focus, and delegates endorsing the association’s further investigation into an ecotourism accreditation system (Tourism Queensland, 2000b).

During the period 1994 to the launch of NEAP in 1996, a wide variety of developments assisted the evolution and eventual culmination of the NEAP scheme. The National Ecotourism Strategy released by the Commonwealth of Australia’s Department of Tourism in 1994 specifically highlighted the role of ecotourism accreditation in Australia (Richardson, 1994; Cock and Pfueller, 2000). The National Ecotourism Strategy stance on accreditation was reinforced by an Australian Commonwealth investigation conducted by Manidis Roberts Consultants during 1994 into the viability and development of a national ecotourism accreditation system regulated by the industry. The report provided recommendations on who ought to be eligible for accreditation, draft minimum requirements and standards, and the administrative arrangements for such a scheme (Richardson, 1994).

Thus, after the preliminary groundwork had been conducted, NEAP was launched by the Ecotourism Association of Australia and the

Australian Tour Operators Network in January 1996 as the National Ecotourism Accreditation Program. An integral component of the program was the inclusion of regular reviewing and upgrading of the criteria, and as a result, NEAP was re-launched in an updated version in February 2000, as the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (Tourism Queensland, 2000b). Unlike ISO 14000, the criteria in NEAP (Edition II) have been specifically designed for nature tourism and ecotourism accommodation, tour and attraction products (Lewis, 2001; Tourism Queensland, 2000a). A product can achieve accreditation at one of three levels: Nature Tourism, Ecotourism or Advanced Ecotourism (EAA, 2000).

Although NEAP applies to two industry sectors, nature tourism and ecotourism (Tourism Queensland, 2000a), not all operators that classify their products as nature tourism or ecotourism can necessarily become accredited. Like ISO 14000, Nature tourism and ecotourism products must first be eligible for accreditation, according to specified criteria. The nature tourism product must:

1. focus on personally and directly experiencing nature;
2. represent best practice for environmentally sustainable tourism;
3. consistently meet customer expectations; and
4. be marketed accurately and lead to realistic expectations (EAA and ATON, 2000).

Additionally, the ecotourism product must fulfil the above criteria, as well as a further four criteria, which include:

5. the provision of opportunities to experience nature in ways that lead to greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment;
6. positively contribute to conservation of natural areas;
7. provide constructive ongoing contributions to local communities; and
8. be sensitive to, interpret and involve different cultures, particularly indigenous culture (EAA, 2000).

The three levels of accreditation within NEAP are distinguished by varying levels of stringency for the consideration of environmental, social and economic impacts (Table 1) (EAA and ATON, 2000).

As NEAP is based on principles of continuous improvement, the program is designed to assist the tourism industry to continually improve standards. Thus, NEAP's criteria are reviewed on an ongoing basis to

TABLE 1. Levels of Accreditation Under the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program

The nature tourism or ecotourism product:	Nature Tourism	Ecotourism	Advanced Ecotourism
Focuses on directly and personally experiencing nature.	Y	Y	Y
Provides opportunities to experience nature in ways that lead to greater understanding, appreciation and enjoyment.	Optional	Mandatory but not necessarily core to experience	Core element
Represents best practice for environmentally sustainable tourism.	Y	Y	Y
Positively contributes to the conservation of natural areas.	N	Y	Y
Provides constructive ongoing contributions to local communities.	N	Y	Y
Is sensitive to and involves different cultures, especially indigenous cultures.	N	Y	Y
Consistently meets customer expectations.	Y	Y	Y
Is marketed accurately and leads to realistic expectations.	Y	Y	Y
Y: Yes N: No			

Source: EAA (2000: 6)

reflect industry standards and performance, and more stringent standards are likely to be put in place following each review (Tourism Queensland, 2000b). The next major review of NEAP is due in 2003 (EAA, 2000).

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach consisted of the following elements. In-depth structured interviews were undertaken with a key informant group consisting of sixteen Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism stakeholders. The group consisted of operators, industry representatives, government officials, and academics (Matysek, 2001a). An iterative comparative analysis of the interview data was conducted in order to gain insight and in-depth knowledge of the nature-based and ecotourism industry.

A qualitative research approach was appropriate as the group of key informants were interviewed on an individual and personalised basis and therefore the study was particularly suited to an in-depth research

approach (Ritchie and Goeldner, 1987). The conduct of structured interviews was the most suitable method to elicit rich data from the key informants who often had vastly different perspectives of the research topic.

Key informants were selected by approaching senior key representatives from the State tourism managing body, Tourism Tasmania as well as the Ecotourism Association of Australia. A brief description of the study was provided to these organisations, along with the request for contact names and numbers of suitable interviewees. Participants were selected according to a criteria sampling method, involving the selection of cases that met the following:

- identification as a nature-based tourism or ecotourism operator in Tasmania;
- involvement in a NEAP trial conducted by Tourism Council Tasmania (TCA) and Tourism Tasmania; and/or
- stakeholder involvement in the Tasmanian nature-based tourism or ecotourism industry.

Thus, interview participants were identified according to their position and relevance in the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry. Interviews were generally of thirty minutes to one-hour duration, whereby a structured approach enabled discussion to be focussed around sixteen questions. Interviewees were each asked the same sixteen questions, allowing for a comparative analysis of responses between stakeholders. All interviews were recorded and transcribed (Matysek, 2001b). Interview transcripts were sent to informants for verification and informants were also asked to provide commentary and revision where necessary.

The categorisation of interview data into themes was an iterative process, revisited at frequent intervals during the data collection and analysis phase of the research. Data analysis began while interviewing was still underway and upon completion of each interview, data were examined from the interview transcripts and concepts extracted.

A more detailed and fine-grained analysis of the interview data was then undertaken once all interviews had been conducted. Additional concepts were discovered during this phase of data analysis. In the final phase of data analysis, all data were categorised into descriptive themes. This material was then interpreted with reference to relevant literature and the analysis was organised into a coherent picture of the research topic.

RESULTS

The key informant group was not intended to be representative of the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry, but rather act as a sample of the broader stakeholder group, and as an indicator for perceptions and opinions within the industry of the study issues.

Perceptions of the potential role that NEAP could play in Tasmania were consistently positive, however significant concerns were raised by a considerable proportion of the group (eight) as to how the NEAP program might function in co-operation with the existing (and widely implemented) Tourism Council Tasmania accreditation program. The other portion of the key informant group were overtly positive as to the requirement for wide implementation of NEAP in the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry. Furthermore, informants proposed that accreditation was of greater importance and relevance within nature-based tourism and ecotourism than mass tourism, due to the fragile environments in which they operate.

All key informants agreed that NEAP has the potential to promote greater sustainability and conservation within the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry. Many advantages were cited as being associated with accreditation under NEAP, and a number of advantages that are not commonly promoted by the Ecotourism Association of Australia through NEAP were identified as being of high importance by informants. The key informant group stated the following advantages, or incentives associated with accreditation:

- promotion as an environmentally sustainable nature-based tourism or ecotourism business;
- association with a nationally and internationally recognised program;
- ability of operators to assess their operations from a strict environmental standpoint;
- provision of a marketing tool;
- delivery of improved visitor experiences;
- provision of a standard for customer and industry judgement; and
- prospects of licensing agreements-extended tenure for access to protected areas, National Parks and World Heritage Areas to accredited operators.

Disadvantages that were commonly voiced with relation to NEAP, included the costs of accreditation attainment and auditing verification (Table 2).

TABLE 2. The Costs to Operators Under the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program (SAUD)

<i>Annual turnover of nature-based or ecotourism operation</i>	<i>0-\$100,000</i>	<i>\$100,001-\$250,000</i>	<i>\$250,001-\$1,000,000</i>	<i>\$1,000,001-\$3,000,000</i>	<i>\$3,000,001 and over</i>
Application Fee	\$176.00	\$203.50	\$286.00	\$368.50	\$583.50
Annual Fee	\$275.00	\$412.50	\$825.00	\$1512.50	\$2061.70
TOTAL	\$451.00	\$616.00	\$1111.00	\$1881.00	\$2645.20

Source: EAA (2000: 12)

These costs were perceived to be significant when coupled with the cost of also being accredited under the general tourism industry, Tourism Council Tasmania, accreditation program. Thus, operators were concerned about the high financial burden of association with two overlapping and competing accreditation programs. Furthermore, the time required to apply for accreditation was perceived to be a significant drawback of the NEAP program, as the application document was stated to be cumbersome and excessive to complete. Informants representing operators expressed concern that the NEAP application document allowed for a great deal of interpretation and misuse, thus reducing NEAP's status as a stringent program.

Other negative issues that were identified by the key informant group included the following:

- insufficient market awareness of NEAP;
- lack of political will and the degree of political hindrance associated with implementing the program on a broad scale in Tasmania;
- inadequate liaising between Tourism Tasmania and operators to provide NEAP information and support;
- perception of NEAP levels of accreditation excluding certain operators (such as Advanced Ecotourism);
- increasing difficulty in gaining accreditation due to regular NEAP criteria revision;
- confusion amongst industry as to what NEAP accreditation may offer;
- competition and duplication of processes associated with widely implemented and accepted TCT accreditation program;
- perception of lacking tangible benefits; and
- the perception of increasing formalities and bureaucracy associated with being a Tasmanian nature-based tourism or ecotourism operator.

DISCUSSION

Despite the problems identified, the potential for tourism accreditation programs such as NEAP as a method to improve the industry's performance is acknowledged and celebrated (Sasidharan and Font, 2001). Accreditation systems are meant to "awaken" tourists with respect to the impacts of their tourism related actions and decisions; enable them to make informed choices while selecting tour operators, travel agencies, resorts/hotels and/or other tourism service providers for their holidays; and act in favour of environmentally sensitive tourism enterprises through their purchasing decisions (Sasidharan and Font, 2001). Simultaneously, tourism enterprises are arguably pressured to improve their industrial practices thereby reducing tourism-related environmental impacts.

Sharpley (2001) states that the depletion or degradation of resources, including those that tourism development depends, results not from scarcity or fragility of those resources but from the excessive and inappropriate ways in which people exploit them. Therefore, Sharpley suggests that any attempt to achieve the sustainable use of resources requires, in general, sustainable lifestyles. Thus, the successful formulation and implementation of environmentally appropriate policies, including NEAP, is dependent upon at least the existence of environmental awareness, and preferably the positive acceptance or adoption of appropriate behaviour on the part of both industry and consumers.

In light of informant concern over a lack of market recognition of NEAP, market recognition of any ecolabel is dependent on the level of environmental awareness of consumers. If environmental awareness and concern is currently low, so too will be the recognition of the NEAP label. However, market recognition is also highly dependent upon financial resources of the funding/awarding body (Font, 2001). In the case of the Ecotourism Association of Australia, finance available for the purposes of marketing is extremely limited, principally due to the comparatively low charge to operators who become accredited under NEAP (Crabtree, 2001). Furthermore, in the initial stages of NEAP, the EAA strongly promoted significant marketing benefits for operators accredited under NEAP, presuming that market recognition would be obtained in the short term. However, the creation of recognition has been slower than expected.

Other stakeholder concerns regarding NEAP included its potential amalgamation with Green Globe 21, however Buckley (2001) states that such an alliance seems unlikely, at least until the latter has pro-

gressed significantly in technical detail. Therefore, a lack of amalgamation with Green Globe 21 strengthens the likelihood of enabling a sector specific add-on to Tourism Council Tasmania accreditation. The reason for this increased likelihood of partnership between Tourism Council and NEAP accreditation systems is that the development of a sector-specific program under this amalgamation is far less complex than if Green Globe 21 were also in partnership with NEAP, thus labelling issues (such as logo promotion and use) are less problematic. Proponents of the NEAP-Tourism Council Tasmania Accreditation alliance (namely Tourism Tasmania, Tourism Council Tasmania and the Ecotourism Association of Australia) suggest that a sector specific add-on to existing TCT accreditation would be most beneficial in introducing NEAP at a broader scale than is currently occurring in Tasmania (Roberts, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

Tasmania continues to build its reputation as a touring holiday destination, based around the image of "the Natural State," both nationally and internationally. Australia's only island state boasts magnificent wilderness and wildlife in a spectacular natural landscape, with over one-third of its area committed to national parks and World Heritage Areas. Tasmania's natural estate therefore forms the central basis for the State's tourism industry, in terms of products, branding and marketing. Therefore, management tools with which to protect and enhance these assets are highly relevant to the tourism industry, especially nature-based tourism and ecotourism, where the quality of the natural environment forms the central focus for such experiences. This tourism sector requires differentiated, high quality products, especially in the case of ecotourism. Therefore, means to achieve distinctive, high quality environmental tourism experiences maintains two-fold importance—due to the requirement for the protection of fragile operational environments of nature-based tourism and ecotourism; and to ensure the delivery of unique and quality experiences to a discerning and high-value consumer market.

The objective of this paper was to assess the relevance of the Nature and Ecotourism Accreditation Program to the Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry. The ISO 14000 standard has been a widely implemented environmental management system standard in many industries, however has not been of sufficient specificity for the

Australian (and particularly the Tasmanian) nature-based and ecotourism industry. In light of the absence in Tasmania of any similar program that specifically addresses the nature-based tourism and ecotourism industry and Tasmania's reliance on its natural image and branding, NEAP can fulfil the requirement for such a management tool, and is therefore most relevant to the industry. Furthermore, NEAP's potential role and relevance in the Tasmanian industry was widely perceived by stakeholders to be positive and viewed as enabling improved environmental outcomes through increased conservation of operational environments and sustainability of the industry.

However, this paper has found that the problems associated with implementing NEAP in Tasmania include the costs to operators, especially when Tourism Council Tasmania Accreditation has already been achieved. Furthermore, the degree of overlap between NEAP and the Tourism Council Program was perceived to be substantial, thus causing operators to be hesitant in applying for NEAP accreditation. Means by which these problems may be overcome include the acquisition of Australian Commonwealth government funding for the Ecotourism Association of Australia, thus allowing industry operators to be subsidised the cost of gaining NEAP accreditation. Such an acquisition could be supported and justified by the forthcoming International Year of Ecotourism (2002), and hence the requirement for high quality and internationally competitive nature-based tourism and ecotourism products. Additionally, the perception of overlapping objectives between NEAP and the Tourism Council Tasmania Accreditation Program remains an issue of supplying the industry with greater information and education as to the objectives and outcomes of NEAP. As the primary management and promotional organisation for the industry, Tourism Tasmania remains central to the successful implementation of NEAP, through increased branding and marketing of NEAP accredited Tasmanian nature-based tourism and ecotourism products.

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