National Parks and Tourism in the Rangelands

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National parks (and to an increasing extent, non-government protected areas) make a vital contribution to the future economic growth of the rangelands. Areas of intact natural ecosystems protected inside parks and reserves contribute real economic value to human society, by conserving useful plants and animals (like wild macadamias, pest-eating birds and pollinating insects), by moderating climate extremes, and by providing clean water and clean air. These values are impaired by excessive human use, ecosystem degradation or conversion to developed land uses. Protected areas, by permanently reorienting land management exclusively to the conservation of nature and maintenance of ecosystem services rather than production, represent the best option for conserving those valuable services. The terrestrial National Reserve System, consisting of national parks, private and Indigenous protected areas nationwide, conserves *non-tourism* ecosystem services worth at least $37 billion a year to Australian society (Table 1; Taylor et al., 2014).

Wild nature tourism (also known as ecotourism) is also a natural ecosystem service, but one which is relatively easy to put a dollar value on. All wild nature tourists, whether international or domestic, overnight or day-trippers, spent $23.6 billion in 2012–2013, a level of spending that has doubled since 1999–2000. Half of this spending is accounted for by international wild nature tourists, which represents 60% of spending by *all* international visitors. The wild nature share of international visitor spending has been increasing steadily among Asian visitors as they become more familiar with wild Australia (Taylor et al., 2014). These estimates, using Tourism Research Australia statistics, cover spending on any and everything during visits to Australia, but also underestimate real spending because vehicle spending or packages and flights paid for overseas before arriving are excluded. Nature-based tourism has shown no signs of slowing growth, total spending nearly doubling from 2005 to 2016 (Tourism and Transport Forum, 2017).

An obvious question is: "Wouldn't they have come and spent the money anyway, park or no park?" Ballantyne et al. (2008) set out to answer that question for visitors to Queensland national parks. They found that in the 2006–2007 period, visitors to national parks in Queensland spent $4.43 billion on their trips. The tropical north of the state had the largest regional share, 30% of all visitor spending. At least $749 million of all spending by parks visitors could be strongly attributed to the parks, meaning they would not have taken that holiday or spent that money if the parks were not available to visit (Table 2).

Table 1. Estimates of the total values of ecosystem services secured in Australia's National Reserve System in 2012 (AUD billions) (Table 1 from Taylor et al., 2014).

		Marine		Terrestrial	
Service	**Example of what protected areas do**	**Australia/ high-income countries minimum values**	**Global average**	**Australia/ high-income countries minimum values**	**Global average**
07 Air quality	Protected forests near cities filter air pollutants			$0.08	$0.06
08 Climate moderation	Protected seagrass beds or forests soak up carbon	$69.92	$76.74	$0.13	$15.93
09 Disturbance regulation	Protected mangrove forests buffer storm or tsunami damage	$94.24	$109.84	$0.16	$12.05
10 Water flows	Protected forests soak up and slow down otherwise excessive runoff			$2.34	$23.79
11 Waste treatment	Protected wetlands filter pollutants from water flowing through	$0.44	$105.41	$2.62	$13.55
12 Erosion prevention	Protected riverside forests prevent soil erosion	*$961.77*[a]	*$3,313.25*[a]	$1.50	$11.94
13 Nutrient cycling	Protected semiarid forests prevent soil salinity	*$198.05*[b]	$0.03	$0.46	$7.66
14 Pollination	Protected habitat near cropland harbours natural pollinators			*$5.71*[b]	$1.80
15 Biocontrol	Protected habitat near cropland harbours insectivorous birds	*$5.43*[b]		$0.94	$6.14
16 Nursery habitat	Protection of key breeding habitat of fish species that are consumed	$21.09	$24.87	$27.38	$72.43
17 Genetic diversity	Protection of habitats of wild relatives of commercial crops	$11.12	$124.28	$0.11	$38.64
	TOTAL	**$196.84**	**$441.16**	**$37.51**	**$203.98**

a) These estimates were so much higher than all other estimates, and based on just one study for Caribbean coral reefs. Accordingly they are considered unreliable and excluded from totals.

b) These values are substantially higher than those based on global averages and so are replaced in these cases by estimates using global average values.

Table 2. Estimated total spending by visitors to national parks in Queensland regions (Table 13 from Ballantyne et al., 2008). 'NP-associated' means all spending by parks visitors on their entire trip, whereas 'NP-generated' means spending that can be unambiguously attributed to the presence of the parks visited.

	National park tourist spending: simulation mean values by region			
	Best estimate scenario		Maximum estimate scenario	
Region	**NP-associated**	**NP-generated**	**NP-associated**	**NP-generated**
Gold Coast	$676,618,526	$82,392,662	$873,698,262	$106,391,301
Brisbane	$680,620,213	$82,879,952	$1,114,798,965	$135,750,428
Sunshine Coast	$464,362,394	$56,545,974	$563,068,517	$68,565,539
Mackay	$94,071,809	$19,351,915	$124,044,083	$25,517,640
Whitsundays	$219,896,562	$45,235,864	$455,817,492	$93,768,170
Capricorn	$94,849,122	$17,592,962	$137,809,425	$25,561,428
Carnarvon	$23,410,598	$4,342,288	$26,789,573	$4,968,034
TNQ	$1,330,952,874	$273,796,020	$2,090,053,773	$429,953,919
Outback	$59,810,172	$11,434,298	$75,600,998	$14,453,132
Townsville	$209,005,953	$38,767,233	$354,356,790	$65,671,824
Toowoomba	$108,571,250	$20,323,700	$140,946,943	$26,143,385
Wide Bay	$181,614,974	$37,360,795	$267,080,562	$54,942,287
Great Sandy	$288,447,312	$59,337,733	$467,094,227	$96,087,955
Total Queensland	**$4,433,231,758**	**$749,361,416**	**$6,690,859,608**	**$1,147,776,038**

National parks benefit tourism at multiple levels. First, they provide desirable destinations tourists can visit on their holidays (destination value). The national parks system is a fundamental asset of the tourism industry, as much as Sydney airport is, but one that is largely taken for granted – more of that below. Second, parks underpin the international image of Australia (or regions within Australia) as a wildlife or nature destination of global standing (attraction value). Visitors are attracted here using nature imagery that mostly comes from national parks. Even if they only visit Taronga Zoo, that wild nature image is what brought them here. Finally, by saving our unique wildlife from extinction, parks ensure that visitors can still get to see native animals which otherwise would already have disappeared (wildlife value). This works at both the destination and attraction levels.

There has been a lot of praise for, or complaints about, the 'grey nomad' tourism phenomenon: praise for their keeping small regional towns alive with the money spent on fuel, groceries, meals, souvenirs and sometimes accommodation; and complaints because they tend to travel in caravans and RVs and so don't spend much on accommodation, and try to camp free whenever they can. Whilst only about a third of all caravanning and camping travellers are 55 or over in age and their daily spending might not be huge, they make up for it by spending long periods on the road, spending as much as $16,000 per annum on their trips, all of it sprinkled throughout regional Australia (Economic Development Committee of the Queensland Parliament, 2011). These figures are a decade old now, and are likely to be much greater as the Baby Boomers hit retirement age. Some parks on the grey nomad trail in Queensland, like Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill), attract 150 visitors a day in the peak dry season, mostly grey nomads (QPWS, 2013).

The point of all this is that without those

parks, there would have been few publicly accessible destinations to visit in regional Queensland, particularly when you consider that the dominant motivation for caravanning and camping travellers is to experience natural beauty and the bush. Without those parks, it is unlikely we would have seen quite the volume of grey nomads passing through and spending their superannuation in the regions that we do now.

New businesses have sprung up in areas where cattle used to be the only option. Undara Experience is one example. The Collins family saw the tourism potential of the strange lava tubes on their station back in the 1980s and pushed for the creation of Undara National Park. Their lodge and tour business at the edge of the park is now a prime tourist hotspot, which doesn't just benefit Undara Experience, but all the other small towns in the region that see visitors passing through and beyond, attracted by the natural beauty of Undara and the other national parks of the region.

Parks have grown substantially in Queensland (including the additions of Undara and Boodjamulla). But there has also been strong growth of private and Indigenous protected areas. Although these do not traditionally have the same 'tourism pull' of national parks, because they are not usually open to the public, there is now a growing number of nature refuges (the official type of private protected area in Queensland) that include a tourism enterprise. Cobbold Gorge is one example to the north of Rungulla National Park, and Gilberton Outback Retreat another to the south of that. Rungulla National Park, on the Gilbert River south of Georgetown, is one of our newest additions, purchased with an Australian Government National Reserve System Program grant and gazetted in 2015. Sadly, that program was axed in 2012–2013 and has not been revived since.

Parks and protected areas should have more growth to come in Queensland, where only 25% of ecosystems are protected to a minimum standard, and less than half of nationally listed threatened species, leaving significant gaps to be filled (Taylor, 2017). Further strategic growth of parks and nature refuges in Queensland, with carefully chosen and well-justified additions like Rungulla and its neighbouring nature refuges, can only be good economic news for regional Queensland.

Conclusion

The economic future of the rangelands can be a diverse and sustainable future, and national parks have an important contribution to make in securing that future. The filling of significant gaps in a representative national park system across all bioregions, and particularly those in the rangelands, will contribute significantly to the sustainable management of the environment and maintenance of ecosystem services that benefit all Queenslanders. Attracting investment in carefully planned facilities for the rapidly growing grey nomad tourism sector, in conjunction with securing new rangeland parks, will help in diversifying regional economies.

Grey nomad tourism has potential to further contribute to the rangeland economy and to be enabled by national parks across each bioregion (Photo: P. Sattler).

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Author Profile

Martin Taylor worked on the successful Salvinia bio-control program with CSIRO and then pursued a career in evolution and ecology in the USA. Since 2004, he has worked for the National Parks Association of Queensland, the Australian Rainforest Conservation Society, and WWF-Australia where he currently is employed as a conservation scientist.