

# Australia's wilderness 'risks being loved to death'

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With 28 million visitors camping, tramping, biking, 4W driving, riding and picnicking in them every year, Australia's iconic nature areas are at risk of being loved to death.

The love affair of urban Australians and foreign visitors with our spectacular wilderness is challenging conservation managers with a new set of problems and tricky decisions, says Dr Kelly Hunt de Bie of The National Environmental Research Program's (NERP) Environmental Decisions Hub and The University of Melbourne.

"The trend towards nature tourism is increasing year by year. There are more people, doing more travel and an urban culture that is keen to re-establish its links with nature," says Dr Hunt de Bie. "This all adds up to growing visitor pressure on our wild places, both managed and unmanaged, and the inevitable degradation of some of them."

"National parks are established with the aim of conserving environmental assets while also providing quality, sustainable recreational experiences. But what if the recreational experiences result in the damaging of environmental assets? Activities of visitors can have significant negative impacts on the natural values of parks, both at the site and landscape scale," she says.

Typically these include soil compaction and erosion, tree and vegetation damage, waste disposal issues and increasing visitor pressure in areas containing rare and endangered species, or where efforts are being made

to re-establish lost species. Visitor safety in the bush is also a factor.

As a result, Dr Hunt de Bie and her colleagues are working on novel ways to help park and wildlife managers navigate the tricky path between meeting the expectations of nature tourists, and keeping the natural wilderness intact for future generations. The work is co-funded through Parks Victoria.

Using Victoria's famous Grampians National Park and the inter tidal zone walking trails of Port Phillip Heads Marine National Park as case studies, the researchers are investigating ways to help park managers to ease the pressure on wild places of high conservation value – without diminishing the experience that visitors gain from them.

"Managers of the environment are routinely faced with making complex decisions with little information and high levels of uncertainty. It's a tough ask, but that's their job. When decisions have to be made regardless of these constraints, structured [decision making](#) (often simply referred to as SDM) is a useful tool for guiding managers through the decision process," she says.

The team is testing a six-step decision process that involves defining the conservation goals and performance measures, developing alternatives and predicting the consequences of each, making a decision – and keeping a careful eye on its results.

"When it comes to making a decision about an area that is getting over-visited, there are basically several alternatives – do nothing, relocate visitors to another area so it can recover or limit visitation in time or space. You can also build permanent features that reduce its vulnerability.

"We are now working on what each of these does for the sustainability

of the site in question – and also speaking to visitors to see what they are willing to accept."

At Port Phillip Heads, for example, the famous visitor walk round the heads at low tide crosses areas covered with the brown seaweed *Hormosira banksii*, which is a haven for wildlife. "Parks Victoria has identified that a key threat to intertidal reef communities is trampling by humans – which may increase in future," says Dr Hunt de Bie's colleague, PhD researcher Prue Addison.

Options range from using rangers and signage to educate [visitors](#), to diverting the route of the walk to less sensitive areas, to opening and closing sections, to building boardwalks over key reef areas. Using the SDM approach, the researchers enabled park [managers](#) to score the various options and so choose the most appropriate at the time.

"It is clear that managing our [national parks](#) and wildlife reserves is a never-ending task – and that it also includes managing the pressures imposed by visitor numbers which are growing at a steady 3 per cent a year," Dr Hunt de Bie says.

"Nature tourism brings more than \$20 million in from overseas each year, so it is clearly a vital part of the Australian experience, which we don't want to diminish in any way. At the same time we need to be sure the experience itself does not deteriorate through over-use. These decision making systems can help to achieve that," she says.

Details of the research appear in the latest issue of the journal Decision Point: [www.decision-point.com.au/](http://www.decision-point.com.au/)

Provided by NERP Environmental Decisions Hub

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