

Visitors "can help save our national parks"

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Increasing nature-based tourism may be one of the keys to saving Australia's endangered wildlife in a time of budget stringency, a new scientific study suggests.

As funding dwindles for Australia's national parks and [protected areas](#), nature-based tourism could provide a financial lifeline, says lead author Dr Duan Biggs of ARC Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED) and The University of Queensland (UQ).

A new study based on South Africa's National Parks reports that increasing recreational access to protected areas, if properly planned and managed, can generate enough income to underpin conservation activities.

"SANParks is responsible for managing 19 protected areas, and is mandated to raise its own funding through tourism," says Dr Biggs. "To attract tourists, the parks have great facilities and offer a wide range of activities, including river rafting, birding, fishing, game-watching, mountain-biking, guided walks and more."

SANParks earns an annual income of AU\$95-100million, and has more than four million visitors each year. In the 2011-2012 financial year, 84 per cent of its total income was generated from tourism.

Dr Biggs explains that this income is used to pay the salaries of park managers and rangers, buy new land for new parks and to expand existing ones, develop and maintain tourist facilities such as lodges,

campsites and picnic areas, clear invasive weeds, combat wildlife poaching, maintain drinking water holes for animals, and raise awareness among local communities about protected areas and conservation.

"South Africa is an excellent example of how the development and management of protected areas can be funded largely through nature-based tourism," says CEED Director Professor Hugh Possingham.

"Australia's wild nature tourism industry currently generates over \$20 billion a year, and just the GST on that amount exceeds the \$1.28 billion that the Government spent on managing and expanding protected areas in 2013."

"While the income isn't directly attributed to protected parks – tourists might visit Australia anyway and spend the money on something else if the parks aren't there – there is still great potential for us to generate substantial conservation funds through tourism."

To increase paying visitors, parks in Australia can expand available tourist facilities and accommodation options beyond camping, and diversify available activities to include horse-riding, mountain-bike races, marathons, well-developed hikes and special interest guided walks, the researchers say.

Having innovative mobile applications that provide interactive information on native wildlife and plants can also stimulate further interest among the visitors. There should also be administrative and legislative structures to keep tourist revenue for conservation and expanding tourist facilities.

"Some of our [national parks](#) are very well run, and people are happy to pay a small fee to visit," says Prof. Possingham. "In turn, these parks have better walking trails and camp sites as well as more activities."

"In contrast, other parks offer very few services and generate almost no income. And if the park is not well maintained, fewer people will visit – which means less funds for conservation."

Dr Biggs adds that this can turn into a vicious cycle: "For example, there are hiking trails in parks in Queensland that have been closed for years – the park can't afford to repair certain areas, so the entire trail is shut off, which effectively locks up the park."

"If parks could charge entry fees and use that to maintain facilities like hiking trails, these parks are less likely to remain locked up to visitors for long periods. This creates a win-win situation for everyone as people get to visit the park, and the park gains more income."

With thousands of parks in Australia, the nation should take advantage of the more popular areas to generate funds for biodiversity, Prof. Possingham says. "Many parks are large, and people only want to visit a small part of them."

"We can isolate 90 per cent of a protected area – leaving 10 per cent open for visitors – and still generate a lot of [income](#) from it. The key is to plan and manage these activities carefully, provide better facilities and experiences, and ensuring that the revenue is used for conservation."

More information: For more information, see:
worldparkscongress.org/

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