4. Managing Visitors

Introduction

This section looks at the ways in which visitors’ interests and opportunities will be addressed while protecting the values of the reserve.

About 100,000 people visit the reserve each year. Tourism research continues to highlight a high demand for experience of Aboriginal culture among visitors to the Northern Territory. Research also suggests that for many visitors these expectations are not met.

Karlu Karlu is part of a living culture. Joint management of Karlu Karlu therefore represents an outstanding opportunity to enhance the experience of a large number of Northern Territory visitors from one of simple scenic appreciation to a rich cultural experience. This opportunity extends to visitors meeting Traditional Owners on their land and appreciating directly their spiritual connection to country. Traditional Owners also welcome opportunities to interpret their land to visitors from their perspective. While not all Traditional Owners want to engage in this way with visitors, joint management brings opportunities to support development of the authentic cultural tourism experiences that many visitors seek.

Principles for Managing Visitors

The joint management partners of Karlu Karlu recognise:

- Visitors provide significant economic opportunities to the local and wider community through enterprise development, jobs and training opportunities.
- Visitors should have opportunities to learn about the reserve’s cultural and natural values.
- Visitors’ experience and appreciation of the reserve’s values are enhanced by well-designed facilities and high-quality information and interpretation.
- Visitor safety is paramount.
- Visitor satisfaction, numbers and activities need to be monitored to guide management planning.
- Well managed commercial operations can assist visitor management by providing opportunities, services and facilities that park management cannot provide.
Visitor Activities, Access, and Facilities

Our Aims

- To provide all visitors safe and convenient access to the main attraction of the reserve, presenting and protecting the marbles as part of a wider cultural landscape.
- To provide activities and facilities in the main visitor area that encourage visitors’ appreciation of the reserve’s cultural and natural values.

Background

Visitor Activity

The Devil’s Marbles is a high visitation reserve. About 100,000 people visited in 2007. Surveys find that about 65 percent of visitors originate from interstate; 30 percent from overseas; and five percent from the Northern Territory. The Stuart Highway, one of the Northern Territory’s most travelled roads, cuts through the reserve and all traffic is subject to impressive and enticing views of Karlu Karlu’s giant granite boulders.

For most visitors the reserve is a convenient, scenic road-side stop, an opportunity to break from a long drive and photograph and explore the boulders of Karlu Karlu. The average visit is less than two hours, involving short explorations from the vehicle bays along the access road. A short interpretive walk at the main visitor site is popular with visitors. A network of informal walking tracks criss-cross the reserve. Camping is a significant and increasing activity. Surveys from 2006 report that some 18 percent of visitors during the peak seasons stayed overnight in the campground compared with nine percent in 1999.

The pattern of visitation is highly seasonal. The peak months continue from May through to August with the highest visitation during the Easter holiday break. Surveys report that what visitors value most about the reserve is its natural setting and low-key development.

A concession to sell visitors refreshments has operated in recent years during the tourist season. The Traditional Owners have expressed interest in establishing a facility by which they can have contact with visitors, interpret the landscape and their culture and gain commercial benefit.

Access

That part of the reserve now accessed by large numbers of visitors was, in the past, a place visited only by respected senior and knowledgeable people for important ceremonial purposes. With the passing of time, Traditional Owners have come to accept visitors exploring the granite boulders, but ask that visitors act responsibly and respect the area’s cultural significance.

An older section of the Stuart Highway re-routed in 1987 provides sealed access north-south through the visitor area. Access to the campground is adjacent to the day use area via a short, unsealed road. All roads within the visitor area are suitable for conventional vehicles. The 50-69 age group is the largest age group visiting the Devil’s Marbles during the peak season.

Facilities

The reserve’s visitor facilities are low-key. They include a day use area consisting of three roadside rest areas with a short interpretive walk, tables, a sealed unit toilet, and one shade structure with interpretive information.

There is a short interpretive walking track in the main visitation area leading from the larger roadside rest area. However, many visitors welcome the opportunity to freely wander and explore the granite boulders in the general visitor area. Traditional Owners would like visitors to be directed away from some sites of higher cultural importance.
The campground is very basic, with space for about 20 cars and three coaches. It contains two shade structures, tables, three pit toilets and 13 wood barbeques. There are no designated coach, caravan or trailer camping sites. The enjoyment of independent campers is sometimes impacted by large group or coach campers, particularly during peak season. Separate camping areas for independent campers and coach tour groups may overcome this concern.

The campground is often full between early June and early August. Commercial overnight facilities are available south of the reserve at the Wauchope Hotel (7 km) and Wycliffe Well Roadhouse (24 km). Both offer camping and unit accommodation. At the closest roadside stop at Bonney Well 12 km north, water is available but toilets are not. At the reserve, overnight camping fees are consistent with Parks and Wildlife Service standards and are paid through an honesty system.

While it has been suggested that the low fees for vehicle-based campers provide undue competition with local commercial interests, a prohibition on camping in the reserve is likely to lead to illegal camping and increased use of free roadside stops along the Stuart Highway.

Congestion during the peak tourist season diminishes visitors’ experience, puts pressure on facilities and exacerbates illegal roadside camping. Consideration should be given to upgrading, expanding or relocating the campground during the term of this plan. Alternatively, visitor experiences could be improved by relocating the campground away from the rock features.

Traditional Owners have expressed interest in providing a commercial camping area on nearby Aboriginal Land, and a centre which could include a base for small tourism enterprises and a contact point for Indigenous community-based rangers. Visitors have recommended improvements to the campground such as suppling drinking water, improved shade, better toilet facilities and enforced restrictions on generators. Drinking water is not provided due to the difficulty and expense of establishing and maintaining supply. Campground cleaning and rubbish removal is managed through a Parks and Wildlife Service contract, renewed every few years.

Table 1. Visitors to the Devil's Marbles Conservation Reserve.

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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98,382</td>
<td>143,293</td>
<td>100,531</td>
<td>96,172</td>
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Figure 5. Monthly Visitor Numbers 2007
Management Directions

4.1 Visitor Access – The old bitumen highway, the campground road and designated walking tracks will be maintained to a high standard for easy access for two wheel drive cars, towing vehicles and visitors that are aged and / or have mobility problems. For safety, environmental and cultural reasons, visitors’ vehicle access will be restricted to existing roads.

4.2 Development Planning – Facility development in the reserve will be approved by the Joint Management partners, and carefully planned with consideration to:

- The presentation and protection of the reserve’s iconic scenery, the natural landscape and its cultural values.
- The demands of high volume traffic, two wheel drive vehicles towing trailers and caravans, and older and less mobile visitors.
- Opportunities to benefit Traditional Owners.
- Minimising ongoing management and maintenance needs.

4.3 Campground – The joint management partners will explore a range of options for the management and improvement of the campground. The Traditional Owners will be encouraged to take up commercial opportunities as campground hosts and managers. Consideration will be given to upgrading and outsourcing management of the existing area. Alternatively this facility may be closed and commercial camping offered on neighbouring Aboriginal land. Community stakeholders will be consulted.

4.4 Walking Tracks – Consideration will be given to rationalising the network of informal walking tracks. Signs will direct visitors away from sensitive cultural sites within the main highly visited area. New walking trails for future guided tours to the central portion of the reserve may be considered by the joint management partners.

4.5 Cultural Centre – The joint management partners will consider developing a facility with which Traditional Owners may engage with visitors, present their culture and gain commercially from interpreting the reserve to visitors. Options will be explored by the Traditional Owners with assistance from other agencies.

4.6 Generators and Firewood – Generators will not be permitted and firewood will be collected outside the reserve. The provision of gas barbeques will be considered.

‘We are worried about tourists taking things … we don’t want them to take things … it will make them sick. It is very spiritual and not to touch some things … put up signs saying tourists not to take things … before we go we need to bless the ground … spray water … need cultural meetings to teach them … need Yapa (Aboriginal) and foreign languages … need to bless the marbles.’ Kirda and Kurdungurlu
Information, Interpretation and Education

Our Aims

- To interpret and promote the reserve as a cultural landscape.

Background

Information and interpretation plays an important role in visitor management by informing people about the values of the reserve and how visitors can respect them. Public education informs visitors about facilities, activities and relevant regulations and explains or interprets the reserve's natural and cultural features.

Visitors’ experience is strongly influenced by the information provided and the way in which it is presented. The partners believe that visitors’ experience of Karlu Karlu can be enhanced through interpretation that brings together its value as a recognisable icon of outback Australia together with its value as a landscape linked to an ancient, vibrant, living culture, a place owned by Aboriginal people and actively managed by them through a cooperative partnership.

The public image of Karlu Karlu is important to the joint management partners. They want to promote the significance of the reserve’s values for future generations. Visitor information is provided on interpretive signs in shade structures, a lookout and signs on the interpretive walk. The reserve’s fauna, flora, geomorphology, Aboriginal and historical values are current interpretive themes. During the tourist season rangers present camp fire talks to visitors on a weekly basis. These are often jointly presented with a Traditional Owner.

A significant number of people visit Karlu Karlu on commercial tours. Most stay for about two hours. Tourism research suggests that many visitors to the outback are “experience seekers”, seeking high quality, educative interpretive material as one satisfier for their experience. There is strong interest among tourists in Aboriginal culture and a desire among many to have personal contact with Aboriginal people.

It is important that tour operators have a sound understanding of the reserve’s cultural values and are able to pass on accurate and appropriate information to their clients. Traditional Owners have expressed a strong desire to correct misinformation given in the past, including incorrect Aboriginal mythology; for example, descriptions of the ‘marbles’ as the eggs of a rainbow serpent. To overcome these concerns, Traditional Owners want to be actively involved in interpretation planning and public education about local history and Aboriginal cultural values, including creation stories and cultural traditions. Traditional Owners also have an interest in commercial tour guiding. They believe this will ensure visitors have accurate cultural information about Karlu Karlu and a rewarding experience of the reserve.

Management Directions

4.7 Community Education and Interpretative Program – Interpretation, information and community education programs will be well-planned, focussing on the value of the reserve as an icon of the outback and a cultural landscape. Interpretation programs will be approved by the Joint Management Committee. The joint management partners will ensure all cultural information shared with visitors is accurate and approved by the appropriate Traditional Owners.
4.8 **Aboriginal Enterprise** – Traditional Owners and local Aboriginal people will be encouraged to take up commercial tourism opportunities on the reserve including camp fire talks, cultural tours and other viable enterprises (refer to 6.5 - 6.10 inclusive). Support and training in tourism and interpretation will be facilitated by the Central Land Council.

4.9 **Tour Operator Guidebook** – The joint management partners will prepare a guidebook to ensure that tour operators working in the reserve have access to accurate and appropriate information about Karlu Karlu's cultural values.

4.10 **Signs** – Signs will be placed on the reserve stating that Karlu Karlu is Aboriginal land jointly managed by the partners.

‘Visitors don’t know what is behind the rocks ... they can look and see what is front scenery ... but don’t know what is behind.’

‘Teach them (visitors) our way, our culture way ... some of them (visitors) interested in country’

‘Right story not the wrong story ... only we can tell the right story.’

‘We keep the hard ones ... we tell them only the easy ones ... Ayleparrarntenhe ... the dreamtime man’.

‘We don’t want some things shown in public’

‘We want our culture stronger ... if we want to be strong we need to be strong as parents ... teaching ... education to be strong ... our young people keeping strong ... if they want to keep their country strong ... we teach culture’

We’ve been taught by old people ... we learn together ... by teaching and learning together. All our kids today white fella school ... when finished we teach them our way’

‘Young people don’t listen ... need to put stories in English and language.’ *Kirda and Kurdungurlu*
Visitor Safety

Our Aims

• To manage the reserve for the safety of visitors.

Background

Although Karlu Karlu is a relatively safe place for visitors, visitor activity on the reserve carries some risk of injury. The main safety concerns include:

• Falls when climbing the granite boulders.
• Vehicle accidents.
• Visitors becoming lost, injured or affected by heat.
• The chance of visitors being injured in a remote area.
• Wildfire.

While it is not possible to eliminate all risk, it can be reduced if visitors have good information, are prepared for hazards and behave appropriately.

For cultural and safety reasons the Traditional Owners would prefer visitors do not consume alcohol among the boulders.

Commercial tour operators bring many visitors to the reserve and are responsible for upholding high standards of safety in every aspect of their operations.

The effective management of emergency incidents requires a plan of action, adequate resources and trained, competent personnel.

Management Directions

4.11 Risk Assessment – The reserve’s facilities and visitor management practices will be subject to regular risk assessment. Risks identified will be rectified on a priority basis.

4.12 Alcohol Use – With respect to the wishes of Traditional Owners, signs will be placed asking visitors to confine consumption of alcohol to the campground.

4.13 Emergency Preparedness – The Parks and Wildlife Service Emergency Response Plan will be regularly reviewed, in collaboration with concessionaires and Police, Fire and Emergency Services. All rangers and concessionaire staff will be familiar with this plan. Incident reports will be submitted to meetings of the Joint Management Committee.
Sand goanna (Varanus gouldii). Photo: Jason Barnetson.